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The Blacksmith of Vilno



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The Blacksmith of Vilno

A TALE OF
POLAND IN THE YEAR 1832
BY ERIC P. KELLY

*Pictures made in Vilno by
Angela Pruszyńska*

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TO MY MOTHER
MASSALEN A PHILBROOK KELLY

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"Literature saved Poland in the Nineteenth Century. It may be called upon to save all Europe in the Twentieth."—Professor Roman Dyboski, University of Krakow.

The Blacksmith of Vilno

Prologue

The Song of the Poet

THIS was the year 1386 that the Grand Duke Jagiello, looking out from his castle tower on the Zamek Hill above the city of Vilno, which his Lithuanian ancestor had founded in the heart of a forest, saw that the world about him was in turmoil. South across the Pripet marshes, the valley of the Dnieper River, and the boundless steppe, thousands of people bowed before his sway. Great was his empire, the empire of the Lithuanian lords, built up by the sword in the days when the Tartars had driven the dwellers of the land of Rus back to the gates of Moskva and the shores of the Baltic Sea. But even the Tartars of that wide strip of land that ran from the Baltic to the Black Sea now recognized the Lithuanian as monarch of the Eastern world, the Ruthenian peoples bowed before him, and the fires of the great God Perkun blazed in forest and grove like a string of beacon lights the night before a battle.

Great indeed was the scope of this vast empire—yet within it and beyond there was a turmoil which presaged no good for the conquering dukes. On the west the old Lithuanian race of the Prus had been exterminated by the Teutonic Knights who were soon to take their name, and indeed the armies of the knights were penetrating these vast forests far and wide, adding day by day a new town or a new castle to their domains. On the east the nobles of the old Rus had gathered in Moskva to successfully withstand the attacks of the Tartars, and at a word from

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these Muscovites the Ruthenians might revolt and turn upon their Lithuanian conquerors. Courageous were these Muscovites and able in battle, descendants of that brave Rurik the Dane, who led the East Slavs for so many years.

To the southwest—and here lay perhaps the solution of this ever-perplexing problem—lived the Poles, the dwellers in the fields. They had raised up a mighty nation with a capital at Krakow on the Vistula River in the shadow of the Carpathian Mountains, and they had, after many years, succeeded in driving back the Tartars from off their lands. Their lands were rich and prosperous, their warriors were brave and valorous. Their scholars were among the first in the world, their faith was that of the West for which men had given their lives without question, nay indeed with pride; and the figure of the Christ was upon all their banners. With such people there had been no war, though these were Christians while his own people were still true to Perkun and the sacred fires upon the hills.

And at once there came a knocking upon the citadel gates and a company of men upon white steeds stood there in the snow awaiting the warder's answer. "We are Lechs," they cry, and the warder admits them, for in the old days the Polish men called themselves Lechs, descendants of Lech the warrior who dwelt with his people in the lands about the Vistula and Varta. "The negotiations are at end," they cry, when they are admitted to the presence of the Duke, "and now we summon you to the royal throne of Poland. The hand of our Queen Jadwiga we offer you in marriage. And the terms of the marriage are these: that Lithuania and Poland shall become one, that you shall retain your title as Grand Duke of the Lithuanians, and that you shall rule all these lands from the royal castle in Krakow."

The blood leaped at once to the Grand Duke's cheek. He was a man of noble cast, though somewhat rough and more at

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home in the saddle than in satin; and though he saw that in this union lay the salvation of either nation, yet he stood silent for the moment, musing. How had this miracle come to pass? For when but a short time before he had quitted the royal capital, this girl-queen had all but flouted him, had almost refused his suit outright in favor of a foreign noble whom she loved. How then could it have come to such a successful issue? He could not vision it, but had he possessed that power of intuition which brings to man's imagination the pictures of actuality that pass upon the screen, he would have seen this drama evolve.

Far away to the south in the old castle that looks out so proudly from the Wawel Hill above the Vistula River, the Queen Jadwiga, a girl of fourteen years, stands gazing out over the court toward the mountains. Her cheeks are pale and her eyes betoken much weeping, and there is in them a fiery indecision that seems to mar momentarily the beauty of her face. For she is extraordinarily beautiful, this child of old King Louis who had ruled in Poland before her, and his death had brought her to the throne at an age when most girls were in the hands of teachers and masters. She wears a yellow gown upon which are woven lilies, and over the gown a blue mantle which has long loose sleeves.

To be a queen—she thought. What means it? That one must forever do the will of others, and never once follow one's own fancies? *Are* the heart's fairest wishes fancies?

For there had come to her a decree from the nobles, borne out by the wish of her mother, that she should marry the Grand Duke of Lithuania and thereby unite the two lands of Poland and Lithuania. Yet even a decree of nobles must have the consent of the monarch—monarch of what? she thought—and that decree could not become binding without her consent. Yet it was almost binding, it represented the wishes of the wisest minds

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of the kingdom, and some there had been who said to her that she would be fortunate in thus being married to the greatest man of that day.

"Yet what care I for greatness?" she asked herself, gazing out again over the courtyard below. And then she reddened a little, for her thoughts ran to one whom she might love. He was a youth, not a great rough man as was the Jagiello, and he came from the courts of Europe where men study to please women and to obey all the behests of chivalry. He was such a one as she might have dreamed of in her earliest girlhood—and yet now there was no choice even offered to her. She must put aside these fancies and dreams and thoughts—and yes, love—She could not. She would not. The hot tears burst from her eyes. It was *her* life, not theirs. She flung open the casement, for though it was winter her cheeks burned with the swift blood of rebellion.

They had told her of duty, of work to be done, of great things to be accomplished. They told her of wrongs to be righted, of people to be freed, of enemies to be driven from the borders, of schools to be established. Could not as much be done if she married this other, this man of her choice, this man of her dreams? Indeed it could—and she stood hesitating, waiting but for the moment before flinging herself away from the window and hurling her refusal into the midst of the council.

But what is this? What is this melody that floats up from the court below? She leans over. There is a youth there in the dress of the Eastern lands, and he carries a harp upon which he plays. He has come by the guard at the gate, and the soldiers and the people are surrounding him to listen to his songs. O immortal minstrel of the border, thou it is who goest from land

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to land singing thy song of peace! Thou it is who, fearing not war nor prison nor hunger nor thirst, travelest from day to day in heat or cold, playing at the tavern door or in the castle yard, or in the bitter winter drawing all before thee at the hearth to hear thy gentle lays! Thou art the first poet of the world, the first bringer of good tidings, the solace of our misery, the prophet of our joys!——

His head is thrown back and he is improvising. She stares at him eagerly. Now leaning from the casement window she meets his enraptured eyes with her own. For this is what he sings:

Two noble peoples, side by side
By every cause and trait allied
Bespeak thee, Gracious Sun——
To West and East their foes abound
To drive them from their sacred ground
Should they not stand as one.

By Moskva's moats the helmets gleam,
At Marienwerder swords are keen
And what defence have we?
The Tartar waits beside his steed
And glory beckons to the Swede,——
Now may this union be!

Something caught in her throat. Her heart began to beat loud and fast, and in it there was something, too, of a newly awakened pride. Moskva—Marienwerder—the Tartar—the Swede—enemies upon every hand, and yet the united nation might withstand them! She then is to bring them together. She by her sacrifice is to make this union possible. She listens again,

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with tears now softened. He throws his soul into his eyes—he is pleading—he sings with all his life:

O Queen of Piast's glorious line,
Thine ears unto our prayers incline
And save thy patient state.
Such marriage earth hath not yet known,
Nation to nation knit and sewn
To share one common fate!

The courtyard clears. The singer is gone, but in the air there hovers yet the fragrance of his song. And at a high window a very young queen is weeping with all her strength; something greater than herself has touched her. She sees a vision of a nation that is to be, a great nation that is to play a part in the destiny of the world. And it is within her power to make or break that nation. . . . It grows dark, the torches light up the court, and the candles are flashing in their cases. She turns from the window and makes her way to the church where, upon her knees, alone with her conscience and her God, she drinks the bitter cup of sacrifice. . . . And when they come lightly to learn from the queen of her decision she cannot answer them with her voice, but she inclines her head in consent.

CHAPTER I

THE OLD MAN OF THE WOODS

THE air of the evening on this day in early June of the year 1832 was slightly sultry, although the sun had set and a light wind was stirring the trees. In the west the sky shone red and pink and orange, with here and there a crystal beam of light shooting up from behind the horizon. Birds were singing their good-night songs, cattle were lowing in the sheds at the edge of the rich meadow that bordered the wood, and it seemed as if peace and tranquillity had descended upon this hamlet to be disturbed by no power that Man or Nature was capable of. In the fields the men and women and children had finished their labor; the day had been favorable for work in the gardens—weeding the long rows of beets and cabbages or harvesting the earliest of the first crop; but labor had not been prolonged after the setting of the sun, according to the old unwritten law of the land, and at the cottage doors the people were gathered in groups scooping up their soup from wooden bowls, talking, lolling on rough benches or singing.

Against the edge of pine trees where the little brook curved and hesitated before darting into the meadows, there nestled a little blacksmith shop. In front of it ran the road, which continued on for a number of miles before it entered the suburbs of the city of Vilno to the northwest, and in the other direction skirted the thicket of trees and ran in the direction of

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Minsk. From the road one could look in through the large, wide-open door of the smithy and see the coals glowing in the forge fire, with a figure near by like a giant of old beating with a hammer upon an anvil. The roughly built bellows of leather were groaning like a wounded animal as a boy heaved them up and down, but above the groaning came the clear, musical crash and cadence of iron upon iron, the healthy, heavy smiting which beat the red, glowing iron into wheel bolt or hasp. *Clang-clang-clang* sang iron upon iron, then *clang-clang-clang* again, followed by a hiss as the blacksmith dipped the metal into a tub of water.

The shop formed a part of the blacksmith's dwelling. Where habitation ended and shop began was a thick wall of heavy timbers. From the outside, the whole building looked like a small fortress—ancient, of thick unpolished beams, with narrow windows and small panes of glass, betokening the fact that the blacksmith was a man of some means, for in the country few could afford glass in cottage windows. The windows were very high, leaving the understructure about the height of a man, two rows of beams in thickness like the walls of an old-time fortress; and indeed in previous years it had served as a place of refuge for the family living there, against marauders and highway thieves. For a hundred years there had been but few of these, but yet according to custom the smith bolted his windows with bars before he retired at night, and the huge oak door that led to the smithy itself was closed and secured by iron rods and locks. The great roof that lay over the whole building was of heavy thatch, fresh and smooth on the outside save where here and there birds had penetrated and nested, and firm and blackened within, with no hanging strands to catch the sparks that danced from the burning coals when the draught from the bellows played through them.

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The forge was at the end of the shop farthest from the double wall that separated it from the dwelling. It was like a brick oven beneath; directly over it hung a hood of metal to catch the smoke and sparks. From the hood a pipe zigzagged to an old brick chimney from which the soot was cleaned each month lest a fire should start there and throw live cinders into the roof of thatch. The anvil stood back a short distance from the forge, nearly in the middle of the shop, to give the blacksmith room to swing his hammer. The water butt was beside the anvil. Around the walls hung scythes, and odd bits of wire and harness and metal, and along the wall which divided shop from house was a long bench supported at each end by stout braces.

On this night the bench held four people, all watching Peter the smith and his boy Stefan at work. Two of them were farmers, who upon returning from market in Vilno that day had met with misfortune upon the road. The horse of one had cast a shoe. Peter was at work upon another now. The second had lost a bolt from his cartwheel. Peter was about to make him another when he had finished with the shoe. The other two were friends of the smith, and Stefan the boy kept glancing at them as he plied the bellows.

It was quite dark within the smithy now except for the spluttering fire which threw its reddened glow directly upon the faces of the men on the bench. The nearer man to Stefan was a priest—his gown and cap betokened that—Father Jan, slender, lean, with white skin and an intellectual cast of features and brow. The farther one at the end of the bench near the door was a curious figure. He was as large as a mountain, Stefan thought, as the flames played with the shadows: huge, round head with white hair, a body whose bulk was exaggerated by the long, old-fashioned Polish coat about it. At that moment

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he shifted his legs and the bench creaked and rocked as if it were about to go down.

"Keep still there," shouted the blacksmith in alarm, "or my bench will break!"

"Have no fear. This bench was built in the days when all Poles were giants. It will easily house a wandering poet."

The blacksmith smiled a grimy smile. "There still are giants in Poland, it seems, and poets, too. Who might think that poetry would live in such a hulk? Had I not heard you chanting your own nonsense in tavern or street it would take the word of a saint to make me believe that you were a poet. A poet, I have always thought, is one who lives in the clouds, who feeds on honey and dew, but you—it takes a whole side of beef each day to give you enough to eat. I truly think your poetry is beef-fed."

"No jokes, Peter," said the huge poet, sweating, for it was hot within the shop, and it was a saying among his friends that he never took off his long mantle-like coat, even at night, but wore it for pride in the old days of Poland when all men wore long coats. "Poetry has done many a good deed in the world and will do many more. 'Slaves ye are, and slaves ye shall remain'—"

"Stop!" shouted Peter at the top of his voice, bringing his hammer down with a clang upon the anvil. "Stop, if you value your life!"

Father Jan had leaped to his feet; the two farmers rushed to the door and looked out in apprehension. Stefan felt his heart leap into his throat with terror for the moment, for the poet's words were part of a quotation from the forbidden poem "Konrad Wallenrod," a poem which in allegory told of the treacherous ruse of the leader of a conquered nation against the conquerors. At the time of its appearance, the conquering Rus-

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sians had not perceived the allegory, but the feeling stirred up among the Poles by the poem, and the revolution against Russia which followed, caused the Russians to regard the poem with particular hatred. The revolution had come in 1830-31, and this was 1832, only one year later, at a time when Poland was overrun with Russian agents and spies trying to scent out "patriots" and to send to the gallows or to Siberia all those who had taken part. Had a Russian agent overheard these words, the poet might have faced death and all those in the shop would have been exiled to the mines in Siberia.

"No more of this foolishness," continued the blacksmith. "You have endangered the lives of all of us." And every man in the shop wiped sweat from his brows, and it was not sweat drawn out by the heat of the day or the fire in the forge.

"I am sorry." Stanislaus was not less perturbed than they. "I shall not do so again. But you scoffed at poetry. . . ."

"I know," answered the smith. "I shall remember a second time. But it is fortunate that we are all good Poles here."

"Our poor country." It was Father Jan who spoke, and hardly above a whisper.

There was silence for a long time until the twilight had died out of the sky, and the red coals alone gave light.

"They say that the Old Man of the Woods is about," spoke up one of the farmers.

"No?" inquired Father Jan.

"Yes. He has been seen of nights along the Minsk road. Two men in a wagon, returning from the market, met him but day before yesterday not two miles from here. He was dressed in bark and the skins of animals. He carried a heavy pine club and he shouted at them in an unknown tongue."

"Curious," said Father Jan. "I was brought up in this parish and I have heard tales of this Old Man of the Woods

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since I was a boy, yet I have never seen him nor seen anyone who has seen him. It's always some one who has seen some one who has seen him. Whenever I hear animal cries from the woods they tell me that it is the Old Man of the Woods. Truly I don't believe there is any such person."

The farmer crossed himself. "Upon my word, I have seen him. It was ten years ago. My father went to the woodcutter's for slabs and I went to hold the horses. We were in a lonely part of the wood, and my father was a long way ahead. Suddenly I looked up; there he was, your reverence, just as plain as the fires in that stove. He had long white hair and a white beard, and he was dressed in skins just as these men said he was."

"He speaks the truth," Stanislaus rose in excitement. "I have heard of this even in the town of Vilno. He is one of the old men that still worship the Fire God Perkun in the depths of the forest."

Peter rested his hammer. "The poet speaks again. Such as he would fill our woods with fairies, our streams with nymphs."

The poet threw a warning glance at the blacksmith which was unfortunately lost in the darkness. The other farmer who had remained silent until now broke in with: "And I have seen him too. At dawn I saw him in the forest, and he was carrying a young deer upon his shoulder."

"It is he who lights the Fires of Perkun," insisted Stanislaus.

The blacksmith was silent a moment. "Indeed, I have seen the fires you mention. Or at least a reflection of them in the sky. But it is a long distance away and looks more like the reflection of lightning on cloud than like the fire that man makes."

"Such it is." Father Jan was ready with an explanation.

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"I have seen the fire you mention—though it is not fire at all but reflection upon the sky. I have watched it many a night far in the distance, high in the air and changing often from yellow to red. But there is no 'old man' who makes it. It is a natural phenomenon like will-o'-the-wisp in the swamp, some gas that burning in a morass throws its light on the clouds. No man has ever penetrated those deep forests, but I hear that the Russians are to cut down the trees and then we shall know."

Stanislaus was about to reply when there came the sound of a horse's hoofs from the road, and a rider dashed down the narrow path to the smithy and flung himself from his horse at the very door. And at once every man was on his feet. Hearts thundered at ribs, for the sudden approach of any unknown man in those terrible days might forebode the worst terror that man knows.

"Is this a smithy?" demanded the rider in a hoarse voice. He spoke in the Russian tongue.

Peter advanced quietly. "It is. Can I do anything for you?"

"My horse has lost a shoe. Put one on." There was nothing ingratiating in the tone. It was a direct command.

A coal on the fire blazed up suddenly. The man's face stood out from the surrounding darkness like a picture behind a candle. Stefan let loose the bellows handle with a start, and the wind sucked into the leather pouch, groaning. Such a face—

Dark as if tanned by sun and wind, lips huge, with underlip rolled up and pointing to the nose, nose a bit upturned with black, squinty eyes above. A scraggly fuzz of hair covered the chin, and thin thready wisps of hair rolled down from under a round cap. Tartar, Turk, Cossack—what might this man be? One of the birds of prey perhaps, drawn to Poland from the

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steppes of Asia to feed upon the corpse of a once-powerful state. Russia had many of these.

The boy caught the bellows again and blew the coals. In an instant the light leaped up and danced about the shop. It brought the rest of the stranger's figure into vision: a brown blouse tucked into a leather girdle from which hung a short bayonet sword; brown, baggy trousers that lost themselves in high riding boots polished and spurred. He was no soldier—though he might be something far more dangerous.

The sharp eyes quickly scanned each person in the shop and came to rest on the boy. He saw a lad of about fifteen years, with honest face, dark eyes and dark hair. Stefan wore a loose blouse, open at the throat, dark tight trousers that were held down with a loop beneath the boot, and over these clothes was a leather apron similar to that worn by Peter the smith.

"Is this your boy?" demanded the stranger suddenly, as if forgetting his errand.

"Yes," the blacksmith answered; then added as if correcting himself, "my adopted boy. His father was killed last year."

The malignant eyes danced. "In the revolution, I take it. What is his name?"

"Stefan Kovalevski," the boy himself answered, advancing toward the stranger as if to demand the reason for the request, a surging pain arising in his heart at the thought of his father.

"Well and good. Now for my horse." He was about to lead the horse into the shop when Peter stepped forward.

"I am just finishing another man's work. Will you not sit and wait a moment?" He pointed to the bench.

"Certainly I will not. I am in a hurry. You must shoe my horse at once."

The blacksmith bowed. "Common courtesy—"

"What do I care for common courtesy? I told you that my

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horse must be shod and he shall be, at once. Now—at once. Do you hear?"

"But—"

"I want none of your *buts*. I come here a servant of the Emperor, and a great hulking braggart asks me to wait while he finishes the work of his countrymen, who may be perhaps revolutionists for all I know."

The blood rushed to Peter's head. "You *shall* wait," he shouted, his feelings getting the better of his discretion. "And what is more, you shall wait until I have finished with this second man who has already been here an hour."

The answer to this was a scream of wrath. "Low fellows—dogs—I'll show you!" And like a flash the short sword was out of his belt. Father Jan, who had suspected from the beginning that the stranger had come to the smithy looking for just such an opportunity to fight, rose quickly to interpose, but Stanislaus held him back.

"Give him the hammer!" shouted the poet, his fat cheeks blazing. "Crack the nut that is his head!"

But he had no need to direct the smith. Peter had his hammer well raised just as the other sprang at him with his sword. Sensing the need of light, Stefan hurled a few fresh pine chips into the forge and plied the bellows. The smithy quickly became as light as day.

"Strike me with that hammer and you'll rot in Siberia for life!" the man was screaming as he lunged at the smith, who warded off the blow with the oaken handle.

"Will you cease then?" asked the smith, for his blood was cooling as he contemplated the consequences of this affray.

"Not until I've drawn blood," retorted the other, and lunged again savagely.

Peter countered; the blow fell harmless. "Have it your

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own way, then," and reversing the hammer quickly in his hand he dealt the other a sounding thwack across the knuckles of his right hand. It was so sudden, so unexpected—for the stranger was guarding his head—that it caught him unawares. He yelled with pain—the sword flew from his hand, and in a moment lay beneath Peter's heavy foot.

"Now be off," he said, "and leave peace-loving men alone!"

But the stranger had no such intention without a final word. His cheeks, which had whitened at the blow on the knuckles, became gray, and then blue, with anger. "I'll be off!" he cried. "And a bad day to you for that. Do you know who I am? I'll tell you then. I am Vassily Bek, special emissary of his greatness the Tsar. And here in a smithy I have found enemies to the Great Father. . . . That adopted boy—*adopted*—do you know what that means? In four days he'll be marching in the Tsar's own regiment for Siberia. Revolutionists—dogs—swine—"

He swung to his horse and leaped on its back. Then wheeling about he vanished in the darkness. They could hear the horse's hoofs sounding on the stones a long way up the road.

For a time no one spoke. Peter finished the horseshoe for the first farmer and nailed it to the horse's hoof. The other farmer had, in the meantime, departed without waiting for his job to be finished, so anxious was he to get clear of the spot where the scene had taken place.

"It was as I thought," Father Jan broke the long silence. "He did not need a shoe for the horse at all. It was merely a pretext to come in here and either gather information or start a quarrel."

"Do you know the man?" the smith asked.

"I have heard of him. He is well known in the city, where he goes about gathering information concerning the people who

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took part in the revolution. He makes long reports to Petersburg, they tell me, and in those reports he indicts innocent people, but he is well paid for his work, and the larger the number of alleged suspects he reports on, the greater is his reward. I fear that there will be bad consequences from this."

Peter threw himself upon the bench and buried his face in his hands. "God help me," he cried. "I could do nothing else! Is it that we are to be forever insulted and degraded in our own land? And yet my cursed temper is always at fault. For myself I do not care, but I have endangered the lives and happiness of you and Stanislaus and Stefan here. Why did I do this? Why did I not remember the lines of the poet and be a slave, for a slave has nothing to fear."

Father Jan was thinking deeply. "Now we must do something," he said at last. "There was something sinister in his reference to Stefan. Could it be that he would take a fifteen-year-old lad away from the hearth of his guardian? Could it be that Bek came here upon that mission, to learn if Stefan were really here? He must have had some information, but I do not know what it means."

A woman's scream from the darkness brought them to their feet.

"What, more upon this accursed night?" exclaimed the blacksmith.

Then a bedlam broke out on the night air, cries and yells and screams, the ringing of bells, the blowing of whistles. A white-faced youth dashed through the open smithy door shouting, "They've seen him. They've seen him."

"Seen . . . whom?" demanded the priest, catching the boy by the sleeve of his shirt.

"Old Man of the Woods! Old Man of the Woods! He came down the road and shouted at Stepcha and Janek and me.

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I saw him and Stepcha saw him, and we ran and called to the village. They are out there chasing him. He is coming this way, but I slipped into the ditch and ran by the birch trees."

Father Jan seized a blazing brand from the fire and rushed out into the darkness. At the road he collided with some one who was hastening in the direction of the woods. The brand fell to the ground but before it died out Stefan, following the priest closely, saw a sight that nearly froze the blood in his veins.

It was an old man who had collided with the priest; an old man with long white hair and a long beard. The eyes that peered out from under bushy white brows were full of terror; about his shoulders was wrapped the skin of a wild animal, and about his legs were fastened strips of bark. With a cry that sounded like the howl of a wolf he leaped away from the priest and darted for the nearest thicket. There was a great crashing there, and then all was silence. Silence however, for the moment only, for immediately the whole village stood about the priest, a pandemonium of voices and shrieks and beating upon pans.

"He went there—there!" said Father Jan, brushing his clothes and arranging his cap. He pointed to the woods, and the whole crowd rushed to the pursuit. But as he stood there they came back—most of them, at least, for few cared to venture into the woods at night, save some of the most daring men, and these were waiting for dogs. "But why do you pursue a harmless man?" he demanded, turning about on the crowd. "This is some old fellow crazed in wits who lives in the woods, and perhaps came in to the village to ask for food. Is it the part of Christians to thus pursue and molest harmless ones?"

"He is the Old Man of the Woods. He is a godless spirit," said one, crossing himself.



The Old Man of the Woods.

THE OLD MAN OF THE WOODS

"No such thing," answered the priest. "He brushed against me and he is certainly flesh and bone."

Some waited for the dogs to come up. Others went home half convinced by the priest, but the legend of the Old Man of the Woods had been too long about the village for folk to regard the apparition with anything but alarm. When at last the dogs began to bay in pursuit Father Jan went back with Stefan to the path leading to the smithy.

"They will never catch him in those woods. He knows the forest much better than they," he said. "But look!" he exclaimed suddenly, "there is what they call the Fires of Perkun." And sure enough, over the distant forest there hung a red glow like the light of many lamps diffused in a mist. The dogs must have noticed it, too, for they began to shrink back by the road despite the commands of their masters.

"I wonder what it can be," thought the priest to himself. "There is some great mystery here; not in the light, for that might come from many things; but the presence of this old man. It is true, it seems, that he has been there in the forest for twenty years; who can he be and why is he there?"

And then they went back to the smithy where the blacksmith still sat upon the bench with his head in his hands, and Stanislaus sat with his huge right arm about him.

CHAPTER II

THE MYSTERIOUS HORSEMAN IN VILNO

ALITTLE earlier on that same evening an inconspicuous horseman on a brown horse tightened his reins at the Russian outpost on upper Pohulanka street in the city of Vilno and drew out from his gray cloak a set of papers wrapped in oilskin. It was still light enough to read, and the sentry and his officer who examined the papers stamped them and nodded to the horseman to continue on his way. He rode straight down Great Pohulanka street, musing as he looked at the rich gardens on either side, and later at the silent, barred buildings about him.

"How different it was twenty years ago this month," he thought. "Would that I could have lived then! For in that year, 1812, came Napoleon to Vilno with his great army on the way to Russia. From all these windows came shouts of greeting; flags were flying, bands playing and our great leader General Dombrovski was at the head of our Poles. What a day that was! How people speak of it now—of the days of hope and promise that followed, and then that terrible retreat from Moscow!"

He shifted a bit in the saddle and straightened out a large bundle that lay under a wad of blankets across the horse's back.

"Lucky for me that my papers were well forged. It was a master that forged them. They make me out to be a merchant doing business with the Russian government in Vilno and they bear the official stamp. What will money not purchase in this world?"

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Then suddenly he began to scan the streets as he went along. "Pohulanka—the street of the Dominicans. Yes, that is the bell tower, St. John's they called it. Then again to the left and around a corner by the university of Stefan Batory." He looked up to the windows of the university, fastened tight and barred, with a huge proclamation on the door below in Russian letters announcing the closing of the university. "That building opposite must be the palace where Napoleon wasted his days from the 28th of June to the 15th of July in 1812—idling away his time, with troops impatient to take the field, while distant Winter was breeding his storms day by day to destroy our magnificent army. Oh, fatal weeks!"

Something suddenly stirred at the entrance to a court adjoining the university. The rider pricked up his ears, listened and watched. In the next instant, that which had seemed a piece of wood leaning against the door came to life with a start; it was a man dressed in black who had remained there so motionless that he had seemed part of the building. As the horse pawed in slowly toward him the man stepped swiftly to the rider.

"Praised be Jesus Christ," said he, giving the old greeting.

"To the Ages of Ages," replied the horseman, lifting his cap.

"The Third of May," said the man again, naming the anniversary of the birth of the Polish Constitution.

"I have found you then. Where do I go?"

"Follow me at a distance. The Brotherhood is awaiting you."

He was away again at once, flattening himself against the wall, then moving slowly in the direction from which the horseman had just come. The latter waited until he had gone some distance, yet within sight, fingered his package beneath the blankets, and let his horse follow the man slowly. As they went along, the streets grew narrower and darker, the buildings grew

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smaller and smaller, the street cobbles became slippery as if with water and refuse, and now and then huge stone arches hung over their heads like bridges.

For this was the old Black City, the dwelling place of the Jews in Vilno. Deep within the heart of the city it lay, with narrow streets and winding lanes, its ancient buildings toppling here and there, with doors and windows barred with iron and metal as if to stand a siege. They passed courts built about ancient moats and filled with crazy, rickety stairs. Down below the earth now and then appeared a staircase that seemed to lead to a subterranean dungeon; little windows just large enough to serve for the flight of an arrow looked out upon them at every hand. And every now and then a black-clad dweller in the city would peer out from behind a creaking gate or rush tumultuously across a little street.

So had it been in Vilno since the earliest times men remembered, that the Jewish folk sought refuge and solace here. Persecuted and driven out of many nations that called themselves Christian, the Jewish people had settled in Poland to pursue their ancient religion and customs.

Crowded into these small quarters they had clung tenaciously to their old faith, and here their rabbis and scholars had preserved their marvelous traditions and culture where many a people might have lost all years ago. And the bridges that ran above these little streets were the remains of the old gates and fortifications that had once sheltered them in days when nations were more wont to make war than in later times. Here the kings of Poland had granted privileges to the Jewish people in order that they might better live and carry on their peaceful pursuits.

For Vilno was a city about which men had waged war since the beginnings of civilization in Europe. There was a colony

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of Slavs here in early days about the old Bakshta Hill, when Prince Gedymin the Lithuanian built his fortress on the Zamek Hill. Men called that hill *Turza*, or hill of the Bison, because it was there that Gedymin, while sleeping after a bison hunt, dreamed of the Iron Wolf that later became the by-word of his line of warriors. And when the Poles grew to master of Vilno, when the Dark Ages had but ceased their hold on the world, the blazing torch of Christianity lighted up the most distant recesses of Lithuania, and with the coming of Christianity civilization spread.

And for four hundred years the Poles and Lithuanians held Vilno as one race, intermarried in blood and culture and tradition and religion. Upon them fell the brunt of war after war, of siege after siege, of devastation after devastation. Sixteen times the armies of the Muscovite fell upon Vilno. A dozen times the armies of Cossacks and hordes of Tartars ravaged the country about; where Poland built cathedral, university, monument, castle, or town, the Muscovite destroyed it; and if it was not the Muscovite, then it was one of the so-called knightly orders that ravaged Lithuanian lands—the order of the cross or the order of the sword.

But though men burnt and destroyed, the foundations remained and were built upon again. Gone is the castle built and embellished by Polish kings; a single ruined tower stands where Jagiello, king of Poland, built his stronghold; gone is the city wall with its gates and its towers and its citadels. But upon these foundations the proud city of Vilno has risen again and again, and to-day one may see the towers of every church by which man may serve God; and the Jewish synagogue, and the churches of Catholic and Protestant, and the mosque of the Mohammedan are among them.

And from the influence of this city and its university

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have gone out some of the men most famous in Polish history—Kosciuszko the liberator, Moniuszko the musician, and Mickiewicz the great national poet. And holding up a shrine that Christians in all these lands seek far and near is the Gate called Ostra Brama, where is found the picture of the Madonna that is the solace and hope of all distressed and downtrodden people. Above the street in the shrine that magnificent picture rests to-day, and thousands come to see it and to pray before it. There it stands, the inspiration of man's ideals, and yet no heart is too lowly nor any soul too meek to find there the sweetest solace in an ever-changing world.

But in the old days when the world was swept with war, and each nation's hand was upraised against every other nation, the Jews in time of war were likely to suffer most. For though they were a people of peace, yet as their toil brought them wealth they were the prey of conquering armies. And thus throughout the old Black City in Vilno, the government built for them gates for their protection against foreign invasion or domestic broil. There they lived through the centuries and there they live to-day.

Turning into a lane in this Black City—the place in Vilno where men were least likely to spy—a lane barely wide enough for horse and rider to stumble through, the guide waited until the horseman came up to him, and whispered in his ear, "Lead the horse." The rider dismounted, and again they stumbled forward, the horse now and then striking his hoofs against the curbstones at the sides. At length in the darkest and narrowest place the guide stopped and struck three times with his fist against an iron gate. It opened as if by magic, and immediately shut again noiselessly as soon as all were inside. As near as the horseman could judge they were in a small, closed court.

"Fasten the horse here." The guide slipped into the horseman's hands a piece of cord that hung from the wall. He caught



The guide waited for the horseman to come up to him.

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the hook at the end of the horse's bit. "Now bring your package and come with me."

They descended a flight of damp stone stairs and waited until a door at the bottom swung open. Farther along a corridor with wet walls, another flight of stairs was descended and another passageway traversed. Finally the guide tapped three times at an iron gate. A slide in it opened, a candle on a board was held at the opening for a second; the grating closed and the door was thrown open. The candle in the meantime had been extinguished, but the rider, moving forward, could feel that he was in a room that held a number of people. Their breathing, suppressed though it was, was quite audible to his keen ears. At length a deep, quiet voice spoke from the distant wall; a Latin sentence fell upon his ears, the challenge of the Brotherhood, and this he answered in well-known words. Another voice took up the strain, and again he answered in Latin.

At this the room was flooded with light, as it seemed to him, though the light came only from an opened lantern held close to his face. He glanced about. There were five people in the room.

One of them, a priest with white hair and venerable beard, came forward and kissed him on both cheeks. "You have the charge?" he asked.

"I hold it," he answered in Latin.

A table was pushed forward, and on it he placed the package he had been carrying. And now as he glanced about he saw that the walls here were damp and covered with moss. The room itself was circular, and high up he could see iron gratings, as if at one time it had been a cell in a prison. The faces that looked upon him were the faces of men in dire extremity. Want and fear and suffering had written messages upon their lean cheeks that only death could remove. They were five of the

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Vilno leaders of that unfortunate though glorious uprising of 1830 and 1831, and upon their heads were prices that would have ransomed a king.

"Let us look upon the prize." A man in rags and tatters thrust his long, bony fingers into the straps that held the cover in place. For the package was a round leather box a little larger than a man's head in circumference and perhaps a foot in height.

They moved the light nearer. The cover fell off. Silence as deep and as dark as the gloom that surrounded them arose in that cell and yet somehow became as eloquent as the orator's tongue.

"Now may I die in peace," breathed one of the men.

"The prize is not secure yet," said another. "It must be taken to that place where our sons will find it in the glorious day of Poland's rebirth."

"Have you further directions?" asked a third man of the rider.

"I have not."

"Then here they are. Here is another pass to take you out of the city on the road to Minsk. When you leave this house you must follow along to the street of the Germans, and along that by the old town house to Subotch street. At the place where the gate once stood there will be a guard. This pass will see you through."

"And after that?"

"You must ride like the wind about five miles along the road until you come to a blacksmith shop. The blacksmith is one of us."

"And will he know the sign?"

"He will. He will answer you, not with the *Third of May*, but with the *Mazurka of Dombrowski*."

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"And after that?"

"He will lead you to the charcoal burner's in the forest."

"And afterwards?"

"He knows the whereabouts of the hiding place. Your papers will tell the rest."

"Good. When do I start?"

"At once. Word of this has already reached Petersburg. If I mistake not there will be a pursuit this very night, and you must make speed after leaving the place of the old Subotich gate."

Each old man in turn came to the open packet and kissed that which lay within, then all stood gazing at it as in adoration. The priest made the sign of the cross above it and each man crossed himself in turn.

"Now go." They kissed him as fathers might kiss their sons. The guide was before him until he found his horse in the court.

"There is the street of the Germans," whispered the guide. "I dare go no farther, for there are spies even here." He too kissed the rider. "I have a son like you somewhere on earth, somewhere in a distant land, for he is one that dares not call Poland his home. May God bless you and keep you!"

The rider strapped the sacred package back in its place on the horse's back and covered it with blankets as before, then stumbled through the narrow way until he reached a wider street which he knew to be the street of the Germans.

This street had always been a busy street in Vilno. In years gone by when the Hanseatic League reached out its broad arms to trade with Novgorod and the lands of the Russian Grand Dukes, the merchants of the league made Vilno an important post, and chose the old street called the Street of Money Changers in which to do their business of weight and exchange. Later this street took the title of the German merchants them-

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selves and it bears that name until this day. The rider, now mounted, made his way through this street past the old town house and into Subotch street—a street which at its crossing with Bakshta street marks one of the oldest landmarks in Vilno. At this crossing he was challenged by a guard in uniform.

The captain of the guard was about to affix his seal of approval to the rider's papers when his attention was suddenly taken by the appearance of another rider, this one in uniform, who came toward the gate from the cross street at the north. His horse, in the glimmer of the smoky oil lamp held by the sentry, could be seen to be smoking as if on fire. The man had ridden him like mad.

"Dispatches! Dispatches!" he cried. "I bring dispatches from Petersburg!"

"Quick. Let me see them." The captain snatched at the outstretched hand.

He had forgotten the seal upon the first rider's papers. And that rider seemed to know by instinct just what the new dispatches contained, for the warning of the old man in the cell had been in his ears ever since he had left the gathering. In a moment the papers just received would be opened and read—and what then? What might be the fate of the cause as a consequence? He could not know—but the time for deliberation was past; wheeling his horse about he rode out boldly past the sentinel at the gate just as the preoccupied captain disappeared within the house.

Luck was with him. The sentinel thought that the captain had sealed his papers! He too, being human, was more occupied in mind with the dispatches from Petersburg than with the fate of a Polish trader, for such the rider's appearance as well as the new passport proclaimed him to be, and since the sentinel had seen the captain take the trader's papers and glance over

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them without comment, he took it for granted that the consent to proceed had been given. And now again the mysterious horseman was upon the road.

As he passed the Church of the Missionaries, he heard from the darkness ahead the sound of another horse coming from the opposite direction. He reined in his own steed to avoid a collision, close by an open shrine where some late worshiper had left a candle. The result was that as the other passed by he saw his face; it struck him by its ugliness—a huge underlip and upturned nose. The other rider marked him as well, and even turned about in his seat the better to keep his eyes upon his face. Then both horses galloped and the sparks went out from underfoot.

The other rider was Bek, hurrying back from the smithy to report the treatment he had received to the captain of the guard. "He shall smart for that; he shall smart for that," he kept saying to himself, "and as to that boy he shall soon be in a uniform in a Siberian regiment."

But as he reached the captain's quarters he found that official in a very stew of excitement. Indeed he seemed so perturbed that Bek, heated even as he was, decided to let his own matter wait.

"I'm glad you have come," exclaimed the captain. "This is something in which you can help me. I have important dispatches from the capital with orders to be on the lookout for a certain Polish nobleman, who is riding alone through the country with a very valuable parcel in his possession."

"From what point does he come?" queried Bek.

"From Warsaw. He was seen in Bialystock three days ago, traced that far by secret agents, but in Bialystock he disappeared, although it was supposed that he was headed for Vilno."

"Is the matter so very important then?"

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The captain whispered in his ear. Bek drew an audible breath. "The Tsar himself. And what can it mean?"

The captain drew himself up. "That is not my business. My task is to find this man and arrest him."

"How old a man was he?"

The captain showed him a description. Bek read it, pulled at his lower lip, and thought very hard. "Now this is queer—"

"How—queer?"

"You say this man is riding alone?"

"So the reports show."

"And the descriptions are trustworthy?"

"From our best agents."

Bek thought a moment, looked at the captain, scrutinized the floor, rubbed his chin, and sneezed. Then, as if the words had exploded within him and were finding a vent— "I have seen the man!"

"What?" The captain grew pale with excitement. "When? Where?"

"Within a few paces of here—just now."

"Here? Now?"

"Yes. He was riding alone in the dark along the road that extends from Subotch street, and he was going in the direction of the blacksmith shop."

"What blacksmith shop? Tell me, man! I'll go crazy, or perhaps *you* are crazy now."

"Stop. Think a minute. Did your guard just pass a man through this post?"

"Yes, I suppose he did. I quite forgot him. Indeed I did not seal his papers. He must be there now, waiting." The captain started for the door.

Bek caught up his words. "He is not there. I met him on the road."

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"But I did not put the seal on his papers. He cannot go on. He will be stopped at the next post."

"You forget there is no other post on this road. The man has escaped."

The captain thought hard now. "No. He is not the man. He was no nobleman. He was but a trader. It said so in his papers."

"They might have been forged."

"That's so. That's so. Come to think of it, he *was* a young man. Here, sentry," he called from the window, "come here."

The man came running over. "Did you pass that man on horseback?"

"I did, your excellency. You had examined his papers."

"But did you see them?"

"I did not, your excellency."

"You should have. That man was a suspect."

"But, your excellency——" The soldier's face whitened. He saw visions of a Siberian regiment.

"Sergeant," the officer called. The under-officer came running up. "Put this man under arrest. Charge neglect of duty. I shall see him in the morning."

"A pretty kettle of fish," muttered Bek to himself. But aloud he addressed the captain. "I have a plan that I think will suit you, something that will serve two purposes. Are you ordering a pursuit?"

"Yes, and at once," answered the officer.

"Then call out your men and listen to me. Several miles in the country there is a blacksmith shop that I believe has been the center of revolutionary proceedings. The proprietor was suspected of being involved in the uprising of a year ago, indeed many thought that his blacksmith shop was an arsenal for the Poles. However it was never proved and after being ques-

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He struck the anvil with his hammer as if testing the metal. Then suddenly he began to drum away like mad. The anvil vibrated, hummed, seemed to dance.

Stanislaus looked up in amazement, the priest eagerly, Stefan all at a loss. The blacksmith was not one to play jokes or drum idly upon an anvil, yet here was an uncalled-for, clanging pandemonium.

Bang—bang—bang—then a double stroke repeated—a single stroke—then the whole cadence again, over and over and over. Stanislaus leaped into the air, then danced in his heavy shoes, ripping up long splinters from the floor where they caught in his soles. A light of comprehension played in the horseman's eyes after a moment, but still he did not speak. He let the blacksmith pound and Stanislaus dance. Stefan still wondered. The priest rose eagerly.

Then—“Cease!” shouted the horseman, the tenseness of doubt all gone from his body. “It was magnificently done. Cease, I say—I have it.”

The hammer lay on the anvil.

“*The Mazurka of Dombrovski*,” he whispered.

For what Pole could miss that cadence? That glorious song of the Polish Legions in the Army of Napoleon, that song which in the spring of 1812 resounded all across Europe, and the men came marching “from Italy to Poland”?

It was the countersign. At the beginning the smith had not realized who the horseman might be, and the horseman naturally was perturbed when the expected answer was not given to his greeting. But as the smith began to think, and as he saw the package and put two and two together, it dawned upon him that this was the man the Brotherhood was expecting. It had been put out of his mind that night by the immediate danger surrounding his own family; and then, too, he had not received word that he might expect the stranger so soon.

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"Are you all of the Brotherhood?"

"We are," answered Peter, "except the boy, and he soon will be. His father was a patriot, killed at Ponary."

"Then I receive my instructions from you?"

The blacksmith nodded. "But first we must attend to your horse."

Stanislaus led it away to the smithy stable, watered and fed it and rubbed it down, while the stranger unfolded his business in the smithy.

Peter closed the doors. "Have you the package safe?"

"It is there."

"Does no one suspect?"

"I think they do. . . . As I left the city to-night a messenger arrived from Petersburg. I rode through without a seal upon my papers and am sure that there will be pursuit."

The blacksmith started. "When will it come?"

"At once, I think. And for that reason I must be on my way quickly. They told me in Vilno that you would furnish a guide."

"Yes. I will go with you to the forest. It is a long way from here and we must drive all night. . . . But stop—perhaps Stefan will go. Should pursuers come they will suspect less if he is absent. . . . Did you meet any one on the road?"

"No. I was quite alone. But stay—there was one man who passed me near the church at the top of the street. A curious-looking rider with upturned lower lip and nose."

"Bek!" exclaimed Father Jan. "And where was he going?"

"To the post, I think. He seemed to be in a hurry."

The blacksmith exclaimed: "By the lightning! Then there is trouble in the air. We must get you off quickly. . . . Stefan, drop the bellows and get into your long coat. Harness up the cart and fill it with straw. Then drive to the forest to the home of Vitold the charcoal burner."

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Stefan hesitated for further orders, but seeing that Peter was absorbed in other plans hurried out of the smithy and harnessed up the cart by the light of a candle-lantern.

"You can leave your horse here," said Peter to the newcomer. "He will be taken care of until you return."

He called to his wife, and at his bidding she came bringing bread and cold meat which the horseman ate ravenously. Stanislaus, who had finished with the horse, filled a can with water at the brook and brought it for the stranger to drink. A few minutes later Stefan drove the cart into the smithy yard and called out that he was ready. Father Jan and Stanislaus and Peter kissed the stranger upon the cheek and made the sign of the cross above him.

"With him go Poland's hopes," said the poet as the cart rattled off down the road, and the three men sat down to talk over the events of the evening.

Half an hour later they were settling themselves for the night. The blacksmith had cleaned out the shop and arranged various bits of work for the succeeding day. Stanislaus the poet lay stretched out and snoring upon the bench, for being a poet pure and simple with no other vocation he always made his home with his friends; and Father Jan was getting ready to leave to visit the bedside of a sick parishioner in the village. Suddenly he pricked up his ears.

"More horses. They are coming down the road."

The blacksmith threw the door bars into place. "The pursuers, without doubt. Now for trouble."

"Will you let them in?"

"I must. Otherwise I shall only arouse their suspicions." After a moment's consideration he said: "They must not find you or Stanislaus here. If they come to make trouble I can better face them alone."

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"But, Peter, I cannot leave you in this fashion."

"You will do no good. I shall not oppose them. Come." He took a bar of iron and thrust it into an iron ring on the floor, a ring so hidden that none but those intimately acquainted with the smithy might find it. A gigantic heave, and a trap-door opened in the floor, disclosing a flight of stairs that trailed off into the darkness. As Father Jan approached and looked down he could see the reflection of the blacksmith's fire upon the barrels of muskets piled there, and beyond them keg upon keg of gunpowder. "My arsenal. Descend. I will send Stanislaus after you. Quick! I hear them turning into the yard. The passageway leads to the edge of the trees. As you come out stuff up the entrance with branches and leaves." The priest descended cautiously and disappeared.

"Come, Stanislaus." The blacksmith rapped the poet in the ribs. "Wake up! The Muscovites are here, and you must escape by the hidden way. Quick."

"I am a match for forty Muscovites," said the poet, yawning.

"I know—but not now. Follow Father Jan through the passage." He pulled the poet from the bench and urged him toward the entrance of the tunnel.

Crash! The butt of a musket sounded on the door. "Open in the Tsar's name! Open!"

"I am coming!" shouted the blacksmith. "In with you, quick," he whispered to Stanislaus, forcing him down the steps and closing the trap almost on his head. Then, pausing a moment to scatter dust and iron scraps over the trap and the ring, he hurried to the door and drew out the iron bars. The soldier who had knocked on the door at first was now drumming a tattoo on the oaken panels until the smith pulled loose the fastenings and threw the door back.

Two soldiers with muskets strapped about their bodies

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rushed in. They were followed by the captain and Bek, and then four more soldiers stood at the door.

"What do you want?" asked the blacksmith in Russian.

"You are our prisoner," answered the captain.

"On what charge?"

"Of harboring a fugitive from justice. Where is he?"

"I know not whom you mean."

"A horseman who rode down this road but a short time ago."

"He is not here. I have seen no man on a horse."

"You lie!" Bek pushed forward. "And where is the boy?"

"Your excellency," said Peter, turning to the officer, "your uniform is the sign of your rank and your rights. I will answer any questions that you may ask, but I shall not answer this man until he shows me his authority."

He said this with such a manly bearing that the officer was impressed. "The man is right. Stand back, Bek, and let me find out what there is to know."

Bek bit his lips.

"Now answer me truly, for much depends on it. Are there any other persons in this house?"

"None except my wife."

"And there have been none?"

"I have had visitors all evening."

"He is evading. He is evading!" screamed Bek. "I'd put fire under his heels."

"We seek a fugitive," went on the captain, "and it becomes my duty to search these premises." At this moment Peter's wife appeared in the door. She had come around from the front entrance when she heard the noise and voices and now stood pale with terror behind the row of soldiers.

A light was brought from outside, and another lantern found in the smithy was also lighted. The soldiers went through the

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smithy, glanced in all the absurd places that soldiers can look—under the bellows and beneath the bench—and then taking the lights searched the house and barn. Thanks to the work of Stanislaus all traces of sweat had been removed from the flanks of the rider's horse, and he appeared only as one of several in Peter's barn.

"There is no one here but the man and his wife," reported the sergeant when the search was over.

"He was here. He was here. That I know," muttered Bek.

"One of you go look up the road and see if there are fresh marks of horse's hoofs," directed the captain. Two soldiers ran with a lantern and came hustling back.

"There are," one of them reported, "and also fresh marks of cartwheels."

"Was that your cart?" the captain asked Peter.

"It was. Driven by my boy Stefan. He went to the woods for charcoal."

"Was he alone?"

Peter hesitated.

"Was he alone?" Bek repeated the question with emphasis.

"No. He was taking some hens to the charcoal burner."

"Ah—let us follow him!" shouted Bek eagerly.

But the captain shook his head resolutely. "Not in the Lithuanian forest at night. There are bogs there as treacherous as quicksand. Nor could anyone but a peasant untangle those roads among the trees. . . . Moreover, I am half inclined to think that this man is truthful. If this horseman is indeed the one we seek, could he not easily have stopped at some farmhouse, or even set out across country soon after meeting you? However . . ."

He turned to Peter, who was throbbing with apprehension.

"When will your boy return?"

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"To-morrow night perhaps."

"We'll be back, but you must go with us now."

"You mean that I am under arrest?"

"Put it that way if you like. We are holding you until the boy returns."

"Why did I not tell him to go straight on to Krakow?" groaned Peter to himself. Then aloud, "Have it as you wish."

Two soldiers led him away, but at the door his wife burst through the company and threw herself upon his neck. "Oh, Peter, Peter!" she cried.

"Be of good cheer, wife. I have done nothing and shall be back with you in a day or two."

Bek grinned.

She sobbed upon his shoulder until one of the soldiers thrust her aside. "Up there!" Peter was mounted behind the sergeant. And then they rode off into the darkness, while behind them the forge fire threw out its last flickering gleam over the deserted smithy; deserted by all, except—alas!—that one loving heart who threw herself upon the bench and sobbed until dawn.

In the meantime the little cart was pursuing its way in the direction of the distant forest. It must have been after ten o'clock when they had left the smithy, and there being no moon Stefan was obliged to drive partly by starlight and partly, as the captain had put it, by letting the little horse find his own way. He had been to the charcoal burner's many times, and where the road was clear, kept along at a steady jog. The stars too were very bright, particularly the Milky Way. Now and then an owl hooted at them from a tree, the frogs were still croaking in the swamps, and once in a grove of willows two nightingales were singing. Stefan let fall the reins loosely and began to muse as

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a boy will upon all the wonders of life, and particularly upon the wonder that had come so recently.

"And so this man carries the whole hope of Poland with him," he thought. "I wonder what it can be. Perhaps it is the document of the Constitution of the Third of May which men are trying to save from the Russians; perhaps it is a precious stone of enormous size which is of so much worth that an army can be hired when it is sold. Perhaps—" But here the horse turned from the main road and began to course along through a grove of trees. As the cart went farther and farther, the number of trees increased and the road seemed to get softer and softer, for the cart began to roll. Stefan seized up the reins ready for any emergency.

The stranger slept. Lying on the straw at full length in the rolling cart he was quite unconscious to the world. But rolled in the blankets under his head was the precious object that he had brought so far. Now and then he would utter little exclamations, and move in his sleep as if he were reliving the events of an exciting day; then finally the breathing would grow steadier and he was quiet.

To and fro rocked the little cart. The road had swung entirely to the south now, and the pine trees were getting thicker and thicker. "In a few hours we will be in the dense forest," thought Stefan. "I must be on the watch lest some wild beast frighten the horse." For there were plenty of animals in the forest: wolves, bears, even the noble bison; but of these only the bears were to be really feared, and they only when frightened or attacked. Still, one could never tell. They went farther and farther, hours and hours, miles and miles, until suddenly the sky above a clearing went red with the first darting ray of the morning sun.

And then the magic of the night vanished, and a new magic

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was upon the world. A singing, as of all the choruses of heaven, rose up—the fiery red ball appeared through the trees, and then as suddenly disappeared, for at this moment they entered from the thinner woods into the forest itself, and the sun was no more seen until he rose over the trees in the late morning. Stefan looked about. The stranger was still asleep; a young face it was—a youth just become man. “May it become my lot to serve my country as he has,” thought the boy, though he knew not how nor by what means this youth was doing it. He knew only from the words of the poet that some great service was being performed.

And though they could not see the sun again until later in the day, they could feel it and smell it. And about them a mist began to rise from the bogs amidst the trees as the warmth of the sun filtered through the branches. Once Stefan saw something of huge size stealing away from the road ahead and plunging into a thicket. His heart leaped with excitement—perhaps it was a bison. No—he came nearer and it remained at a distance looking over at him, and then suddenly with a start he realized that it was a man.

“The Old Man of the Woods!” he shouted out, so that the sleeper sprang up as if an alarm had been given. “See, behind those trees—he is running now.” And the stranger saw him too, the old man with white beard and hair, with clothes of skin and bark, whose presence in the village had caused so much excitement the night before. Before their eyes he vanished, as completely as if the woods had swallowed him up—and indeed it is not a hard matter to vanish in Lithuanian woods, so full of ditches and swamps and morasses are they.

The stranger heard the boy’s story with much interest. “I wonder who he can be,” he pondered, repeating Father Jan’s words of the evening before.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOME OF THE CHARCOAL BURNER

MORNING in the forest! What words can equal the happiness of these? When all about, the lofty trees full of life and growth surround one, and the blood flows quick in the veins in answer to the sap in the trees. When there comes the smell of pine, when the soft needles underfoot make the path noiseless, when the sun flicks the arches above with golden sunbeams. What may one find in the world to bring loftier thought than these? The spell of life brings with it a feeling of infinite peace; life, life, everywhere that one looks or hears or feels, there is life; even where the rotting trunks of fallen trees lie trestle-like upon the earth, living moss and vine have covered them and made them live again. Each little pool is swarming with tiny creatures, each tree branch holds nests or caroling birds. And in the clearing, where the rays of the sun come direct, one may throw oneself upon the couch of moss and dream and dream and dream. How small seems man's endeavor beside these giants of creation, these pines, these oaks, which, breathing no ambition nor feverish purpose, yet reach up to Heaven from earth. Flowers of the wood are blooming with their subdued hues, animals unused to man go scurrying across the path.

On and on goes the cart, the wooden arch above the horse's head bobbing up and down like the prow of a boat on the ocean.

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And now as noon approaches there is a scent of gray smoke amidst the trees.

"We are nearly there. I smell the charcoal fires," said Stefan.

"Good," replied the other. "It is the end of a long journey for me, though indeed when I have disposed of my trust I must begin a new journey for my own safety."

The trees are thinning before a clearing. A field of wheat appears, high and green. Beyond, there is a pit smoking like the crater of a volcano, and farther along is a little hut. In the bright glare of the sun, to those who had traveled so long in the shadows, the vista seemed like a glimpse of fairyland—the field, the garden, the little house. It was a building of logs, whitened, with a low-eaved thatch, casements instead of windows, and a tiny chimney that smoked furiously.

"Hallo, friends, hallo!" The figure of a man came running from the little house, and at his words the air reverberated with the barking of dogs, who, fastened to the barn shed in the rear, rushed out, clinking their chains, to inspect the newcomers. No man may live without dogs in these forest recesses. One needs them in the hunt, needs them to guard property; needs them to drive away wild animals that come to eat the fowls; needs them to stand forever on guard, particularly at night. And he who knows his dogs may read in their barking whether person or animal is approaching his house at night. There comes a *yip*, *yip*, *yip*, when the rabbit crosses the path and hurries toward the farther forest glade; there is the sharp bark of eagerness, and the howl of distress at being chained and prevented from pursuit, when a fox comes near a dwelling. The bear is greeted with a mad bark and much showing of teeth. But when man approaches in the night, there comes a long, cautious growl, five or six loud yelps in succession, and then the growling again.

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Wise is the forester who knows and trusts his dogs, for lying in his bed he can tell by their yelping at any time just what is happening about his homestead.

"Stefan, as I live!" the man exclaimed. "Welcome! And whom else have you here?"

The figure of the horseman straightened in the wagon. "I bring this package to you."

"*May Jesus Christ be praised!*" exclaimed the forester.

"*To the Ages of Ages,*" replied the horseman.

"*The Third of May.*"

The horseman embraced him. "My orders are to deliver this to you and see it in a safe place before I leave."

"Come in," said the other, "and eat. It is a long journey hither. . . . When did you start?" he asked Stefan.

"Last night, late."

"Then breakfast and sleep will not be amiss. Come." He led the way to the door.

"Father," came the sound of a girlish voice from within, "who has come?"

"Your friend Stefan and an honored guest," he answered. "Hurry that ribbon about your hair and help us, for we must eat."

There was the smell of roasting meat on the air—savory it seemed, too—and in the little kitchen a barefooted youth was heaping charcoal beneath an iron broiler. A kettle was singing above hot coals and there was added the scent of fresh-steeped herbs. The outside door led directly to a kitchen; the small room beyond was a man's sleeping room, with shelves loaded with books, upon the wall; and a door leading to a third room concealed the person who had just shouted out.

"You live like *szlachta* (nobility) here," exclaimed the horseman in a surprised tone. He had expected to see a rough peas-

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ant cottage with whitewashed walls, and the single living-room which was often shared with domestic animals.

"Oh, comfortable enough," said Vitold, for that was the charcoal burner's name. "We have a cow and fowl and other luxuries, and what else we need I buy each week in the village."

The daughter of the house came running. With a bound she was upon her father's neck, and then, after greeting the stranger somewhat shyly, held out a hand to Stefan. "How glad I am to see you!" she exclaimed.

If the forest held anything fairer than this child, certainly Stefan had not seen it. She was perhaps a year younger than he, light of skin with yellow hair and eyes as blue as the Polish skies. The freshness of the morning was upon her face, and the sun itself seemed hidden in her hair where there was a glinting like gold. She wore her hair loose in a single tress caught in a blue ribbon that she had just been fastening. A white blouse with flower embroidery upon it fell to her waist, and the flowers continued in stripe-like patterns down her dark skirt to the border, where an arrow design ran about the edge of the skirt. There were white stockings below and sandals of soft deerskin.

"And I to see you," he answered, meeting her frank glance.

Vitold stepped aside to look at the picture. "Storm cloud and sun," he said, for the two young people presented such a contrast: Stefan dark, with somber clothes and hair, yet not an unhandsome youth, and she as light as the fairest Lithuanian.

"Janek," she called, "bring benches to the table and set the meat and bread upon it."

"Lilia is my housekeeper," said Vitold. "Since her mother's death these many years gone by, she has been to me all that a daughter could be. She is truly my lily, my Lithuanian lily, fairer than any flower in these woods—" And he hesitated

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a moment, for his voice caught in his throat. "Janek, you rascal, take the gentleman's cloak. Send Kuba down to put the horse in the shed and see that he is taken care of. And now the meat is ready."

He took his seat at the head of the rough table and passed to them portions of the roasted meat and fresh bread. Lilia poured from the steaming urn a hot drink that had a most delicious aroma. "Tea is hard to get just now, and very dear," explained Vitold, "and so we raise our own. It is an herb much prized by the ancients, hereabouts, an herb that my mother favored even after tea became fashionable and was to be had in large quantities." The stranger found the drink delicious.

"You have not always lived here?" he asked.

"No. I have seen better days."

"I meant no impudence," said the visitor, blushing.

"Not in the least." Vitold leaned forward. "I had a small place in the country and lost it in the darker days. When fortune no more favored me, when enemies sought to destroy what little I had, then I came out here just after the death of the previous charcoal burner. I have men here who do my work, I act as agent of the woods, and I supply the town with charcoal. You may see my pits smoking out there beyond the gardens. I am happy; I have my old library, my guns, and my work—and then my daughter is the best company that man could ask for."

"And is she happy here?"

"I think so. I spend several hours with her each day myself. We read and talk, and I think that she is as well along in her education as any girl of her age."

They passed, on finishing the repast, into Vitold's room, where the door was closed. Stefan and Lilia sat at the table for a moment, but sprang up as she said, "Come see my garden."

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From the garden they strolled to the edge of the woods. Stefan appeared just as wide awake as if he had been sleeping soundly, for in youth the gold of morning brings an enchanted world after a sleepless night. There are no pangs of tired heart or heavy eyelids, the heart beats as freshly as ever and the world takes on new beauty. They sat upon the thick rich sward of dry moss at the edge of the forest where the clearing came to an end, and looked up into the lofty trees and dreamed of the wonders therein. . . . Lack of sleep brings a curious sense of discernment; familiar objects take new shapes, motion unnoticed in other waking hours now becomes apparent. . . . And then, fed with the beauty of the sylvan world, Stefan suddenly closed his eyes.

When he opened them Lilia was still sitting beside him. "You have slept for some time," she said. "Do you know why the messenger came to Father with the package he was carrying?"

"No," he replied, a little ashamed of his drowsiness, "but it is something very important. Indeed, it is a great secret." And he told her what he knew of the stranger's errand, not omitting the scenes at the blacksmith shop of the night before.

"You are in some danger," she exclaimed, her eyes struck with sudden childish pain. "It would be safer for you to go to Krakow directly from here. Janek can take you to the forest edge at the south and there you can hide with friends until a wagon comes."

"Perhaps there is danger," he answered. "But it is not immediate. I must return to the shop and see Peter and my mother" (he thought of Peter's wife as mother) "before I go."

"And will you not come back here again?"

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"I do not know."

"You must, or we shall come to you."

Their friendship had extended over many years, and they had a kinship in most common things, a love of the woods and fields, a love of books, which they devoured together in the charcoal burner's house, and a natural friendship which had already outlasted many others.

"If you go to Krakow, I shall try to see you before you go," she repeated. . . . "Stefan," she mused, "I wonder if good days will ever come to us again. Father hopes and works, and yet it all seems so useless. Shall we ever be able to enjoy our native land again and be as free as our fathers were?"

"God helping us, we will," he answered.

She put her hand in his, for these were brave words. Many an older tongue might have feared to utter them, for the country now lay defeated and torn into three parts after what had seemed its supreme struggle to free itself. And he, Stefan, remembered this moment as one of the sweetest in his life, as he sat there in the forest on this sunny morning, and close beside him beat this loyal heart ready to bear him up in that which he knew to be the great motive of his life.

"And as to the Old Man of the Woods you saw near the smithy," she exclaimed suddenly, "I myself have seen him many times."

"You have!"

"Yes. I think him harmless. Many a time I have heard a rustling in the brush that I thought was an animal and then have seen him scurrying away, over there, into the very heart of the woods. He is a gentle soul, I think, one perhaps demented by fear or cruelty, who lives hereabouts in the forest."

"And the Fires of Perkun?"

"I have seen that often, too, and I know not what to make

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of it. But I do not fear it. Indeed I always watch to see the reflection in the sky. It is not a fire that spreads, and that is curious, too, for sometimes our woods are very dry. It must be a fire contained in something in the very heart of the forest, and high too, for otherwise the tree-tops would hide the reflection."

"Has no one ever attempted to find out?"

"No. We have here no other habitation save our own, and the road by which you came ends at our house. The hunters come here occasionally but they cannot go far. The forest is not open. It is full of bogs and marshes, and fallen trunks are often piled as high as city walls. Then, too, men fear the wild animals—the wolves come sometimes even into our clearing in the winter time when they are hungry. They come always though by twos and threes, and never in large packs as men say they do."

"Let us go a little way into the forest."

He still clung to her hand. Together they leaped over piles of boughs and heaps of brush as the sunlight began to die out around them. Little by little the shadows began to deepen and a chill came into the air.

"Look!" she exclaimed, suddenly pointing. "Do you see that large pool of water? Come to it and I will show you a secret that no other knows. I found it here myself."

They made their way to it, and at its edge she stooped down and cleared away brush that hid a stone. "Do you see this stone?"

He did.

"Then look closely while I hold back this branch and see what is inscribed upon it." He knelt down.

"Why, this is curious."

Upon the stone was carven with some rough instrument a

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symbol like a double cross. Much work had been done in the carving, for the lines were deep. It was in this shape:



"What do you make of it?" he asked.

"That I will tell you," she said, "but look again here."

At a distance of several feet she stooped again and brushed away another branch. There was a second stone with the same symbol upon it:



"Now stand up," she exclaimed. He rose to his feet.

"See that on the outside of each stone is a huge tree. And if you will look directly ahead across that pool you will see that there are two rows of trees, each in a line with these trees, beside the marked stones."

He looked. Sure enough, it seemed to be true. But if the lines of trees had been planted by man's hand they must have been set there years and years before, for they were the oldest trees of the forest and they had to some extent grown out of their former positions. However, there seemed to be a distinct avenue between the two rows.

"They are oaks," she said, "the sacred trees of the old Lithuanians."

He was on fire at once. "Let us follow this path. See, it must be grounded with stone, for no other trees have grown in the space. This is an old road, or rather a path, for men

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could go through it only singly. Perhaps it leads to some mystery in the woods." The spirit of adventure flashed into his heart.

"No," she said in alarm, "you must not follow it. It is impossible!" In her anxiety to prevent him, she threw herself in front of him and one foot slipped into the pool at the edge. She made an effort to save herself but her body turned a little and her other foot slipped down the pine needles into the pool.

"Help me—I am sinking!" she cried out. Indeed she was, for the bog, ages old, full of rotting trees and decay, was as treacherous as quicksand and drew all living things beneath its surface once they unfortunately stepped into it.

Stefan threw his arms over her head and locked them beneath her arms. Then he tugged with all his might. She did not come loose, but sank in farther. He dropped his hands to her waist and pulled but without effect. The bog was actually sucking her under and the motion drew his own feet along the slippery needles where he could find no purchase.

"I have it!" he cried suddenly, and stepping to one side caught his legs about a small tree. He was not so close as before, but his firm hold gave his body the power of a lever. In a moment he had her on the bank.

"You see," she gasped, "it cannot be done. The bog is like that all the way."

"Thank God, you're safe!" he said.

She was still breathing fast, but she carried on the conversation as if nothing had happened. "I have tried it before. I have even circled the bog for a distance, but there is no way. Up above here the trees are absolutely impenetrable."

"You must come out in the sun and dry your feet," he commanded.

They went out to the edge of the woods, where she took off her stockings—her sandals had been swallowed up by the

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bog—and laid them out in the sun. "I will tell you what I think about the mark," she continued. "I believe that if it were possible to cross the bog one could go directly to the center of the forest by that path that you can see so plainly on the other side. That bog was undoubtedly known to the old Lithuanians who lived in the forest, and served them as a moat of defense against their enemies."

"And yet the Old Man of the Woods goes in there, you say. How does he do it?"

"I do not know. Perhaps he has the secret. Indeed, he must have, for no other person can penetrate there."

"But you told me you would tell me of the sign. Have you ever seen it before?"

"Yes. It is just like the sign on the shield of the knight in the Lithuanian coat-of-arms. You will find it somewhere on a brick in the old bell-tower in front of the cathedral in Vilno. That old bell-tower was once a temple of Perkun—or, at least, if not a temple, then it was a building with a high pulpit from which the priest of the God of Fire, Perkun, could address the people of the neighborhood. Later it became a tower of defense, and then when Christianity came and the priests extinguished the sacred Fires of Perkun, it became a tower housing the bells."

Stefan was thoughtful for a long time. "And to think that you have found this path! Who knows where it leads? If we could follow it we might learn the secret of the Fires of Perkun, and perhaps find the dwelling place of the Old Man of the Woods. Perhaps he is one of those old priests, those wandering bards, who watched the sacred fires, and perhaps we might find there wonders untold."

"Stefan," she said, turning to him suddenly, "I think that you saved my life."

"No. I am ashamed. I endangered it," he answered.

"But you drew me out. My feet were sinking in the bog."

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He was silent. "Speak no more about it," he said at length. She caught his hand again. "Stefan, do you know that the woods are full of living people?"

He looked at her in astonishment.

"I do not mean such living people as you think. But my people were Lithuanians, and I think that we still feel that the trees and streams and heavens are filled with strange and mystic folk. There is a nymph in the river, the bubbling spring is but the tears of a disappointed girl, there are little sprites in the clouds that sit on each billowy feather in the heavens and guide it wherever it goes. When the lightning flashes and the thunder rolls, it is the great God Perkun himself who is speaking. And in the sky the moon is the wife of the sun, but he does not see her, for she has been disobedient. And the little stars are their children who roam the heavens looking always for flowers."

"You are a poet," he said, entranced.

"No, I am no poet. I am, I think, a pagan."

"Yes, you are a poet, and the poet is the greatest of men."

"Do you think so, Stefan?" she asked. "I have always thought so, and when my father reads me the poems of old days and new, I think that if men would follow the words of poets, then the world would be a better place to live in."

"Indeed it would," he said.

"For did not the poets inspire us to rise in revolution in 1830 and '31? Was it not the poet's word that freedom was the greatest blessing of mankind, that led our people to seek their freedom in the only way they knew. . . . Ah, the poor poets!" she exclaimed. "They receive no recompense—they are thrown into jails—they must wander to and fro, exiles upon the earth as long as they live."

"But afterwards—"

"Stefan, the day will come!"

CHAPTER V

AN EDICT OF THE TSAR

LATE that afternoon Vitold the charcoal burner and the horseman sat studying a chart in Vitold's room. They had been there long, as the horseman's bloodshot sleepy eyes showed. Vitold was tracing with the point of his quill pen a map of the forest and its surroundings.

"I know where this place must lie," he said, referring again to the papers brought by the other, "but it is a difficult place to reach. It will take us three days or more to get there, though had we a path directly through the woods we might make it in less time."

"Have you ever been there?"

"No. I am not even sure that it exists. However, since the person who made your chart seems to be accurate in everything else, he must have known of this spot. That is the place where the package is to be left. I suppose that another member of the Brotherhood will be there waiting?"

"Waiting or will arrive soon, according to my directions, which I have followed faithfully. I left Warsaw at night, was rowed across the Vistula in a boat, and at Praga this package was delivered to me by the secretary of the order, together with the papers giving me directions. All our members on the route were informed and looking for me, though I confess I was a bit troubled at the blacksmith shop, where the countersign was not the *Third of May* but the *Mazurka of Dombrowski*."

"How were you troubled?"

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"The smith did not at first give me the countersign. Then finally he played it on his anvil."

Vitold laughed. "He is a rare one, that Peter. And you see the Brotherhood had wisdom too. For a smithy is a public place, and had you come there when others were in the shop the countersign might have been detected. The blacksmith was undoubtedly ordered to play the tune upon his anvil as you heard it, although he might have done it at his own caprice."

"But what of the future?"

"I must think. But it is true that, in order to reach the place designated here, a long journey is necessary. It seems to be near the center of the woods, but as I said there is no road on this side. In such case we must make a long detour, clear back over the path you have already followed, even to the blacksmith shop, and around to the right. There will be this advantage—there is a priest near there, Father Jan, who knows almost everything about this locality. We can call on him for aid and perhaps the blacksmith too."

"But if it is necessary to retrace my steps, why did not the Brotherhood send me by that path at the beginning—that is, from the blacksmith shop and not from here?"

"I can't understand. This chart has two paths to the center of the woods marked in ink. One of them goes from here directly to the place. That would be the shorter way, but, as I said, there is no path here. The forest is impenetrable, and there is a bog that is impassable. The second path goes around from the blacksmith shop and strikes into the forest at a different angle. That is the path that we must try, although we may find it impossible to follow. Few people know about it, and in my day I have known of no one who has ventured far on it."

"When shall we start?"

"To-morrow before noon. I shall send Stefan away early

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in the morning to return to the smithy alone. Saying nothing of our plans to any one but Lilia, we will set out in a cart some hours later, driving as far as we deem safe. From the blacksmith shop we must travel on foot, of course, and a long journey it will be at best. But now—" he added with compassion in his eyes, "you must sleep. We will wake you later in the evening. In the meantime I will make preparations to leave. Janek is the most faithful boy on earth. I will leave him and Kuba here with Lilia. I hate to leave her in these troublesome times, but there is no other way when the safety of the cause is at stake."

Early in the morning Stefan set out with a half-load of charcoal wisely provided by Vitold to conceal the nature of his journey to the forest. At the edge of the clearing he turned to wave back at Lilia, who stood at the door watching his cart vanish amidst the trees. The weather was fair as it had been for several days, and toward the late afternoon he passed out of the forest and drove along the country road. There was no need for hurrying, the journey was pleasant, and he had ridden so many times on a rocking cart that the motion did not bother him. Past familiar hills and groves he rode, until at last he saw the wooded slope that rose on the farther side of the little brook that trickled by the blacksmith shop.

They should have been there to greet him, he thought, as he looked ahead—Peter and his wife, and Father Jan perhaps. But there in the door of the smithy was no one; indeed, the smithy door was closed. But as he looked, the door of the house opened and some one came out. He looked again, and then the blood fled suddenly from his heart. The person who had just come from the house was a soldier in Russian uniform!

He whipped up the horse and dashed into the yard. What if that evil-faced Bek had already caused trouble and taken the blacksmith away? What if his journey into the woods had been

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taken for a flight and the family were held for ransom? For Bek had said that he would make a good soldier in a Russian regiment. Could he have meant it? He, a fifteen-year-old boy, training for medicine in the university—what could the Russians want with him? He hitched the horse to a post in the yard and hurried for the door. He would soon learn.

There came a firm grip upon his arm. The soldier was upon him. And now another came running. The blacksmith's wife with face as pale as a sheet broke from the clutches of another woman who was holding her and comforting her, and caught Stefan in her arms. "My boy, my boy," she sobbed.

The soldiers brushed her away. Then the door of the smithy was thrown open and there stood Bek and beside him another soldier and the blacksmith.

"Here you are," said Bek to Stefan. "We had your blacksmith with us last night to scare him, but we've let him go." That part of it was true; the blacksmith had been so discreet in his answers to the captain that that official had decided he knew nothing of the rider and had released him. "But we have you now, and a good soldier of the Tsar you'll make."

The soldiers caught Stefan's arms and turned them behind him, then circled them with iron wristlets and a chain. This done, they swung him about to face Bek, who took a paper from the inside of his coat and began to read it aloud. As he read, the blacksmith's face went from white to red and from red to yellow. His wife fell fainting into the arms of her friends and was taken away.

"A decree of His Imperial Greatness, Tsar Nicholas," read Bek, adding to the name of the Tsar many titles, "to this effect, that all ORPHANS under the age of 16 years are to be taken from Poland and sent to Russia where they may be brought up in the true faith and in love of our Holy Mother Russia. . . .

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And you, Stefan Kovalevski," he went on, while folding the paper back into his coat, "are to be taken to Vilno and there lodged as a prisoner until you can be put into a company of other orphans and sent to Russia. There are many others awaiting you."

"But why in God's name do you put irons on him?" demanded the smith, running forward. "He is no criminal. He has done no wrong. If you must take him, take him—but why lead him through the streets like a common thief?"

"All orphans are to be so conducted to Russia," said Bek with a smile, enjoying to the utmost the agony of the smith. "And be careful what you say, or there may be found a charge upon which you yourself may be conducted in like manner."

This broke the smith completely, and the big fellow threw himself on the bench, his bosom heaving with grief.

"Do not grieve so for me," said Stefan, at the moment forgetting his own agony in the agony of these whom he loved as father and mother. "We shall see each other again."

Peter rose. "I was a child," he said. And after kissing the boy on both cheeks he made the sign of the cross above him. Then lest he should give way again he rushed into the smithy and began to pound with a hammer upon the anvil.

The soldiers were on their horses, the boy behind one of them, awaiting the word of command from their sergeant to move forward to the road. Stefan, to keep his eyes from the pained faces behind him, gazed into theirs. These faces did not seem excessively cruel; indeed, it is probable that most of them hated the job that they were ordered to perform. But they stood in fear of the most terrible authority that the world has ever known, the authority of the Russian Tsar.

"Forward!"—they were off.

And now they were clattering over the stones. Through

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a Jewish village they dashed, the black-robed inhabitants watching them from behind shutter and door. Through meadow lands where men and women were working at the crops and children tended the cows. Through a clump of farms where at the roadside the brook turned a great wheel and the singing water ran silver and cold. Over a hill, with trees on either hand, and a little church thrusting its steeple up from the valley. Through the dust and smoke of another little town, and now the valley of the Vileyka River appears, and the first sight of town, the hill with three wooden crosses upon it, the ruins of the old castle and the wall where stood the first Slav settlement in Vilno. There are stones underfoot in the road; the tower of the Church of the Missionaries is above them, and they are soon challenged by the sentry at the place where stood the old Subotch gate.

"To the Bazylian Prison," comes the order.

They pass through the upper end of the city, not far from the Ostra Brama, where even now men and women are praying for help to the Mother of God. But as they swung through the square where Subotch ends and Vielka begins they saw a sight that might make men wonder if such things were possible.

For there stood a company of boys under sixteen years of age ready to be deported to the interior of Russia and Siberia. Lads they were, of the age when all people should smile upon them and give them help. Orphans they were, to whom men should have given the love that death had taken away. Upon their faces was written the expression of terror—hunger and thirst were there too, but these were lesser. One boy, demented perhaps, held a wooden doll in his arms, praying to it and caressing it. Another, in a sack of coarse cloth that had once been a bag, was nursing his bloody feet and washing them with tears. Another who wore chains was vainly trying to hold them in

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his hands, for they cut into his flesh. Man's brutality to man was written on every face, fear and cringing marked every form. And there they stood, a whole company of them to be deported far away from their native country, to die amidst brutal treatment and hunger and cold. Many of them had never known a home, many of them had lived in the streets, but at any rate they had known a country and they had known familiar things. And now they were to lose even these. There were others who had been brought up by friends and loved by them, who were torn away from such friends and put in this company.

"Forward!" shouted a Russian guard who had come and of them. "March." They moved forward slowly, wretchedly, some of them clutching at heavy chains, weeping, crying out for help. O, thou who calledst thyself the Little Father of Thy People, where wert thou when these children were sent to torment and to suffering? For of these companies of boys that went the long way to Russian wildernesses, to Russian steppes, to Russian jails, not one ever returned to his native land!

"This," thought Stefan, "is to be my fate," and he turned away his eyes.

They rattled under a doorway where soldiers were walking to and fro, then rode directly through this company, under an overhead arch. Here there was a little court. The sergeant dismounted and rapped at a door.

"We have another prisoner."

"Put him in the cells with the others on the second flight, at the end of the court."

Two soldiers pulled him from the horse. He saw his name chalked on a board: "Stefan Kovalevski—Orphan." "Another lot goes to-morrow," came a voice from behind a shutter.

They crossed in front of a church. Outside it, was a shrine where candles were burning. They moved toward a building

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at the upper end where there were more soldiers on guard. "Upstairs," said the sergeant, throwing open a door.

This was the famous old Bazylian cloister where the members of that University Society, the Philaretians, had been imprisoned a few years before. Turned into a prison by the Russians at that time, it continued to do service as such, on occasions, until many years later. For the number of prisoners in Poland under the Russians always far exceeded the capacity of the regular prisons, and the Russians were not averse to using church or cloister or school for purposes of imprisonment. The cloister had dungeons, but as yet the upper floors held all the prisoners. It was in one of these upper-floor cells, indeed the same cell into which they thrust Stefan, that the young poet Mickiewicz had been imprisoned with the Philaretians, and this cell has been immortalized in that poet's poem "Forefathers' Eve."

Two soldiers worked at Stefan's bonds when he had been thrust through the door of this cell; the bonds came loose, but immediately the loose end of a chain was caught about the boy's foot. As he jerked at it in a spasm of pain, he heard a cry beside him, and then saw that he was chained to another boy. The two were to be kept together in the room.

"What is your name?" he whispered, after the soldiers had locked the cell door and disappeared.

"Zygmunt. And yours?"

"Stefan."

They grasped hands.

"We will be brothers."

Zygmunt made the sign of the cross. He was not so tall as Stefan, and much less in girth.

"Have you been here long?"

"Ten days."



"We will be brothers."

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"Are you an orphan?"

"I was brought up with foster-parents. They regarded me as their son. Now—well—" the boy brushed away a tear with a dirty cuff.

They talked until twilight fell. A soldier came in and set a bench against the wall. Somewhere in the corridor a candle flickered. Outside in the courtyard they could hear other prisoners brought in and chains clinking as they were assigned to cells. Now and then some boy in another cell could be heard sobbing; another was at his prayers. But to bolster up his own courage and the courage of his companion Stefan kept up a steady stream of talk. He told him of the brave deeds done by his father in the uprising of the previous year, of the deeds in days of old under Kosciuszko and the glory that once had been. And as they said their prayers together, invoking the aid of the Mother of Mercy whose picture hung above the gate outside, there came upon them that calm that so many Polish exiles have known. Soon the boy's breath came slowly and regularly, and he was fast asleep in Stefan's arms.

CHAPTER VI

STANISLAUS MAKES POETRY

VILNO is the city of the romanticist, the mystic, and the poet. First built as a clearing in the midst of a forest that stretched across central and eastern Europe, it was the shrine of the Worship of Fire, and that worship lasted nearly until our day. Western civilization has never yet put a definite stamp upon it; it remains different from all other cities in Christendom; it is, and yet it is not. For in the Lithuanian forests as well as in these narrow streets the soul of man seems ennobled and magnified. Dreams and fancies, which in a safer and more conventional world one would label as dreams and fancies and cast aside, here become realities; here spiritual truths are more evident than in the Western city. Here in his stronghold may the Jew expect daily the coming of his Messiah—here the Pole did hope and pray for a Messianic nation. Here in the surrounding forests, according to some savants, the world of men began; in the old Lithuanian language one finds words that strike familiarly upon the ears of all dwellers in Western lands.

As drawn into a whirlpool so were all nations drawn into this city. Asia in motion sent its waves clear through to the Baltic Sea and upon those waves rode natives of far-distant countries. The knights returning from the Crusades found here new fields for conquest. The Jew and the Khazar, tossed here by circumstance of war and peace and trade, settled within these walls. The peasants from Bialorus or White Ruthenia spread over the fields, and Tartars and their children came and went.

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But it was Pole and Lithuanian who had lived in Vilno since the old days and who had built the city and the civilization surrounding it.

Mystic city of the North! None may know thee who have not been close to thy heart. Fair to look upon in the valley where the Vileyka River meets the Vilia, where amidst green trees and beautiful vistas rise thy hills and monuments—an inspiring sight to the stranger who first casts his eyes upon them. But thou art a mystic and a hidden city. It is the allegory which fits thee best. For that which is the outside of things is not that of which thou art proudest. That which thou shelterest within thy bosom is hidden from all men save those who love thee. The outside of each dwelling and street front is but a gate, and within this gate live thy hidden devotees. Thou art secret and precise, saving thy charms for those who seek to learn thy heart. Born of the forest, the forest's mystery still lives in thee. From the outside thou art like other cities—but once the scales have fallen from the observer's eyes thou art seen to be unique, alone. The surface means nothing; that which is underneath counts for all. Along one curved street of thine are an hundred ordinary doors; ordinary—yet if the stranger will parley with the keeper of the gate and look inside, he will see marvels. Cities within cities, dreams within dreams, thoughts within thoughts. And time means naught to thee. All thy magnificent Gothic, thy walls, thy castles, thy churches—destroyed by enemies, plundered, burned, wrecked—these still live in thy heart, and he who seeks can find them. For in each stone there is a story. The peasant who builds his walls of stones from the earth but uses stones which some Lithuanian or Polish prince of olden times used for building his castle.

And then thy great mystery, the Madonna of the Ostra Brama. How many hearts and bodies and souls have been com-

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forted before the picture of the Eternal Mother there? Man's self is like unto the city—in outer things resembling his brothers, but in the inner self there is the individualizing flame. And there it burns beside the picture, the light of man's faith on earth. For faith in God and faith in man will redeem the world and make it good, and for this come the thousands of pilgrims to the shrine.

Thus mused Stanislaus the poet on this same evening, as he went about the city earning his daily bread. Existence for the poet was hard in those times; he must live literally upon the crumbs which men gave him from their tables in exchange for his verses. In search of crumbs he wandered into the restaurants. He tried at first the small ones, but they were empty and deserted. Poles feared to gather even to eat, lest suspicion should fasten the dread word Conspiracy upon them. They were eating their bitter bread behind closed shutters. He went finally to his favorite place, a little eating-house down three steps from the sidewalk on Great Street. The door was open and the proprietor stood behind his little table, but there were no customers.

"Life is hard," he said, greeting the poet.

"That it is. I have good poems but no one to read them to."

"And none could pay." The man lighted a little oil lamp. "Still wearing that great elephant hide, Stanislaus? Are you thin-blooded that you need such a covering in summer?"

The poet shook loose his huge coat which dragged on the ground as he walked. "No. It is my fancy to wear such a coat as this. In old days there was no great Pan but wore a mantle sweeping the ground. And when I am too old to work, then will I have this coat cut up into a suit of clothes, and from that, when I am ready to die, will I have four suits made to give to orphans." He caught the edge of the garment and wrapped

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its loose folds about him as a Roman might have wrapped his toga, only it was more full of cloth than any toga that man ever saw in Forum, or on Bema. "Thus I preserve the honor of old days," he said, drawing himself erect.

The effect was magical. Stanislaus usually walked stooping in a kind of crouch. It was when he stood erect that one saw the nobility of his figure and realized the strength that lay hidden in his body. And he was not fat—when he stood straight every bulging muscle resumed its natural place, and the mantle-like cloak seemed even much larger than it did when he fell into his crouching pose. Why he chose this attitude, none might say; perhaps it was a poetic fancy, for poets' fancies are all-important with them; perhaps he wished to assume stoutness, thinking it aristocratic and suggestive of the leisurely life of the old days.

"Will you not have a bite to eat?" asked the proprietor, "or a swallow of vodka?"

"The drink I will take," he answered, tipping back his head and throwing it down at a gulp. "The food I must refuse, since a man of honor cannot continually accept food from his friends. I must earn my supper. However"—he fortified himself against an empty stomach—"I may return for a crust of bread if my efforts prove fruitless."

He leaped out to the street again and later entered the eating-room of an inn some distance down the street.

"Poems for sale, poems," he cried out, bowing down and offering cards upon which his poems were written.

A few people were eating there, but no one paid any attention to him.

"Never give to beggars," said a man whose elbow he touched.

"I am no beggar. I am a poet," he declared.

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"All one."

He tried another table where a woman sat with two Russian officers. They had no ears for him.

In the farthest corner of the room he could just discern two men sitting. The lamps had not been lighted, for the eating-room lay on the western side of the building and there were no houses between it and the sunset sky. They were busily talking—in Russian—he caught their words as he approached.

"I think I can get it out of the boy. I am sure that he knows where the suspect went."

Stanislaus stopped dead in his tracks. He would know that voice among a thousand others. It was the voice of the man who had insulted the blacksmith. The man was Bek the informer. And creeping up slowly, bending as low as he could so that he would not be perceived, Stanislaus heard the other man's answer. It was the captain who had been in the smithy.

"Perhaps you had better see him."

"I have thought from the beginning, your excellency, that I could get something out of this boy, Stefan Kovalevski, if I had your permission. I know ways to make people talk." Stanislaus shuddered; he too knew these methods. "And now if you will give me a pass by the gate to see the prisoner, I will visit him in his cell and find out for you this very evening as much as it is possible for any one to find out. Perhaps after all the boy does not know much; then again, his long absence at the very time when the fugitive disappeared may mean something as well."

The captain nodded. "How shall I write this? Shall I use your name?"

"Yes," answered Bek. "But no—stop. Perhaps it would be better that my name did not appear on the pass. The fewer that know me, even soldiers, the better work I can do. Sol-

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diers, even, are not to be trusted with too much information."

"Very well," the captain assented. "I will make it out simply as *Pass Bearer*. You can hold this and use it at any time you wish. Here, boy"—he called to the youth who helped the waiter—"bring me paper and pens and ink." The boy, running, just missed colliding with Stanislaus and thus drawing attention to him—and Stanislaus at that moment had as good a reason for not wishing such attention as any man living.

Gone was the hunger from his stomach. Gone was all thought of earning enough to satisfy it. His eager spirit burned with a flame of purpose—he *must* get that paper. And as a poet's ideas dance into his head, so an idea danced into Stanislaus' head. If only the man would take the right direction. The Bazylian prison it was, where boys were impriscned, and there Stefan must be. But when had they arrested him, and why? These boys were orphans. And then there burst upon him the meaning of Bek's words in the smithy. That was what he had meant! Stefan *was* an orphan. But he had seemed to be so integrally a part of the blacksmith's family that it had been hard to class him as such. He really was no orphan in the better-understood meaning of the word; he had people to look out for him, people to care for him, to see that he did not become a public charge.

He *must* get that paper.

The idea that had first come into his head now seemed a bit doubtful. It depended upon Bek's leaving the captain and walking alone down the street toward the prison. It must be dark for a successful issue, and the whole matter must be well-planned and well-timed. In a few seconds he was safely out of the inn and waiting on the street outside. If only things would come in order.

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It grew darker and darker. Here and there a solitary, soot-grimed lamp gleamed above the street, but for the most part windows were closed and shutters were barred as if the plague were afoot. There were no passers-by, either, for man stayed at home in those troubled days, and the only noise upon the street stones was the occasional tramp of a soldier on sentry duty.

Then suddenly with a sharp creaking noise the door of the inn opened, and Bek, hat in hand, strode through and started out alone toward the prison. Stanislaus caught a glimpse of his unmistakable face at the opening of the door. "Alone. This is lucky," he whispered to himself, and followed.

And now the poet was no fat man crouching with the weight of flesh, but a large, straight fellow dancing along on tiptoe after the unsuspecting Bek.

"Keep on this side of the street," he exclaimed under his breath. As if obeying his admonition Bek edged in closer to the line of houses.

The prison was three squares away, and they had proceeded about a third of the distance, pursuer and pursued, when Bek suddenly stopped and looked about.

"What now?" thought Stanislaus, taking refuge behind a flight of high stairs. It was so dark that Bek could not see him, but it was well to be cautious. "I hope he won't decide to cross the street." It seemed at first as if Bek would, for he scuffled his feet a bit as if changing his direction, but then, as if having reached some quick decision, turned about and went on his way again.

"Good," thought the poet, "and now for action."

He had taken no thought for his own safety. A friend was concerned and that was enough. In the old days the boy's father had been one of his heroes, had befriended him on many occa-

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sions, had stood for all things that he loved best. And now the son was in prison—well, he would do what he could.

Bek was just opposite the stone steps leading down to the little eating-house where Stanislaus had stopped earlier that evening. The tiny glimmer of its dirty oil lamp cast through the open door a faint and yellow light upon the stones. Bek hesitated. Like a flash of lightning Stanislaus was upon him from behind and hurled him with such suddenness down the steps and followed, himself with such rapidity that if the happening had occurred in broad daylight it is possible that no one might have noticed anything, save perhaps that two strangers had stumbled over a flight of steps.

The proprietor leaped to the door. "Shut it and put out the light," commanded Stanislaus. "This man beneath my hands is unconscious. That sudden fall knocked the wind out of him. He is an informer and has my friend's life in his hands." The proprietor blew out the light and crouched with the poet over the prostrate man.

Bek was breathing, but the fall had stunned him. So much force had Stanislaus expended that he lay entirely within the little eating-house door, and it was an easy matter to slam the door to.

At that minute there came footsteps on the stones outside, regular, heavy, measured. "It is a sentinel," whispered Stanislaus. "I think he has heard nothing."

The soldier passed by. Stanislaus drew a long breath. "I did that just in time. Fortune has been with me so far, but the worst is ahead." He felt Bek all over and took a folded paper from inside his coat. "This is it, I think. I must make sure. Go back into your kitchen and strike me a light so that I can see. No, I have a better scheme. Get a piece of rope and tie this fellow hand and foot. Gag him and leave him in the court

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back of your house. Then we'll see to the paper. He carries no other papers with him." The poet made doubly sure of this by rummaging again through the informer's clothes. "I am sure that this is it."

They bound and gagged him and thrust him outside the rear door into a small, enclosed court. "In the morning he will not know which door he came through," said Stanislaus. "He will make you no trouble, anyway."

The paper on examination proved to be the desired pass. Stanislaus was exultant. "Why, with this I can pass any guard and any sentry in the city!" he exclaimed. "Provided only that that accursed captain does not see me with it. And the best of it is that Bek himself does not know what struck him. He'll think that a bolt of lightning dropped on his head, in the morning."

He kissed the proprietor on both cheeks. "Keep up a good heart," he admonished him. "Things will be better. Things will be better." And then he slipped into the night again, resuming his old crouching walk and lazy swagger.

Once a group of soldiers confronted him. A lantern was swung in his face and a voice bade him stand. "It is only the town poet," said the sergeant who was with them. "Get home and stay indoors," he ordered the poet.

"I am going. I am going," he replied in a quavering voice. "But if you wish I will compose you something in verse."

"Home! Home!" shouted the sergeant.

"Yes, yes," muttered Stanislaus as if cowed, turning into the street of the Germans.

The soldiers went along Great Street, but the poet, grasping up the loose folds of his coat, waited only until he heard their footsteps die out, when he straightened and turned into the street leading to the old Black City. It was indeed a black city

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on this night. Windows and casements were heavy with iron bars and locks and chains; a homeless cat darting out from under his feet ran madly into some subterranean cellar. Along the street he trudged until in its blackest and most dismal turning he felt with his hands a pair of heavy doors. With perfect familiarity he reached his hand in through a hole in one of the doors and pulled at a piece of wire. The bell was so far away that he did not hear it ring, but a few moments later, with his ear to the hole, he heard the cautious footsteps of a man.

"What do you want?"

"*The Third of May*," whispered the poet.

A portion of one door opened. "Come in."

"I am Stanislaus."

"Inside," whispered the other.

They went through a long corridor. A door opened as if by magic, and they were alone in a small room.

"What brings you here?"

"Stefan Kovalevski, son of a patriot, is imprisoned in the Bazylian monastery. I would rescue him."

"There are too many prisoners of importance. We cannot take risks for a single boy."

"But I have a scheme and I need help. The boy is part of our cause." He whispered further.

"Your plan is good. What can I do?"

"Have a cart in readiness, a half-mile from the Subotch entrance. Fill it with straw and old clothes so that we can have the boy under cover."

"It will be done. How can you get him there?"

"We will leave the city through the house near the Ostra Brama. There is no guard at that point for no one suspects. From the house we will go through the cellar under the street and come out in the garden beyond the post. From there we

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will creep along the wall to the point where your cart will be waiting."

"It will be done."

"Then God be with you. I will see you or your driver later."

The other, who was the same who had met the mysterious horseman, saw him to the gate and let him out cautiously.

"And now for the great effort," said Stanislaus to himself.

A short time later the officer in charge of the guard at the arched entrance to the Bazylian monastery, used as a prison, received a call from the sentry at the gate. He ran out hurriedly, for his task was an important one and it would not do to let irregularities happen. At night the guard at this prison was always doubled. A company remained in the guard room waiting for any summons, while five soldiers paraded back and forth inside the court. Besides these, the prison was well-manned with soldiers—a sergeant having possession of the keys and using them only at the orders of his superior. A high bracket lamp burned at the main entrance to the court, sheltered by the arch overhead, and it was the duty of the soldier stationed there to see that it was always filled with oil.

"Here is a man who wishes to speak with Stefan Kovalevski, prisoner," said the sentry.

"Has he permission?"

"I have, your excellency," exclaimed Stanislaus, stepping forward. "He was the son of my best friend, now dead, and I made a promise to him that I would always keep the boy under my protection."

"But what has that to do with me? He is a prisoner here and is to be deported in the morning."

"I know. But I must give him his dead father's blessing. I have been to the captain of the guard, your excellency, and received his permission."

"That is a different matter. Did he give you a pass?"

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Stanislaus held up the paper he had taken from Bek. The officer took it from his hands and examined it under the light. "It is regular," he said.

A soldier with gun and bayonet approached. "Go with this man to the cell of Stefan Kovalevski in the farther building," the officer said. "He may stay for five minutes without lights. Do not leave him."

They started, the soldier leading the way. "Hurry up," he commanded the poet.

But Stanislaus dragged behind. "I am sick and old," he said. "I can go but slowly. Surely you would not hurry a sick man." The soldier made an exclamation to the effect that he would hurry the devil himself no matter how sick he was, but, though going on ahead, he slowed his pace a little.

They fairly crawled across the court. In front of the church the poet made a great point of removing his hat before the shrine and bowing clear to the ground.

"Come on, old hulk of bones," said the soldier angrily, prodding him with the point of his bayonet.

"Hey, good fellow," replied Stanislaus pulling himself up, "be not so rough. Think of your father and how you would grieve if some soldier prodded him. For the love of the good Christ leave a man alone at his prayers. Now I will come," and he followed the soldier into the building where the prisoners were.

They went up one flight of stairs and the soldier stopped at the door of a cell.

"Just five minutes," he said, "and no lights."

"Comrade," said the poet, turning to him, "I thank you for your kindness. Think of me in your prayers, and drink this for luck." He held up a bottle which the soldier was at first loath to receive.

"It is against the rules."

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"Well, take it. Take it. A drop or two won't hurt you, and you can share some with that other soldier at the door." The other soldier came forward, and the two conversed in an undertone. Then the first soldier took the bottle and drew from his belt the key to the cell which the officer had given him.

"Now in with you, and hurry up."

The next moment the door had closed behind him.

CHAPTER VII

"BENEATH 'THY PROTECTION"

"**S**TEFAN," he whispered. "It is I, Stanislaus." A sob of delight came from the darkness. In a moment his huge arms were about the boy.

"There, be comforted. We will save you. Your friends are all at work."

"You cannot. You cannot, Stanislaus. I am chained."

"Chained!" The poet staggered back in consternation. "I had not thought of this. To what are you chained?"

"To him. To Zygmunt. He is asleep beside me. A boy younger than myself." But though his voice was hopeless, a nameless joy had surged into his heart at the words of his friend. Ah—loved, loved poet!

"What can I do? What can I do?" thought the other to himself in despair. "The boy himself is enough of a burden. Two of them I can hardly take. But perhaps he is small. . . . You say he is younger than you?"

"Yes. Indeed a child."

"It can be managed. Where are your chains?"

"Here." He drew the poet's hand along to his right foot. "The other end is on Zygmunt's left."

"Is it a heavy chain?"

"No, it is not heavy—but, dear Stanislaus, do not think of trying to free us. Your own life would be endangered because there are many guards to pass. Besides we could run only with difficulty."

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Zygmunt waked up suddenly and began to cry. He started in alarm as he felt the huge hand of the poet running over him, but Stefan clapped his hand across his mouth. "Be still. He would save us."

Zygmunt quieted instantly. He had reached the end of his hopes, his spirit was broken with days of imprisonment and he was willing—nay, eager—to lean upon others.

"Your time is half up," called the guard through a crack in the door.

"I know, I know," said Stanislaus aloud. And then for the guard's benefit: "My blessing be upon you, Stefan. I give you as well the blessing of your dead father, and be obedient and grateful in all things."

Then, whispering: "Stand up, you two, and do not rattle the chain."

With deft fingers he measured the chain, felt its weight and thickness. "It can be done," he said to himself. "A little pain, perhaps, but then I have only to travel to the street. The night is dark and none can see there. At the gate the boys can carry the chain between them and the house is but across the way."

"Now say not a word," he urged them. "Keep within my cloak and cling close to my neck. If you feel your feet coming out from beneath the robe pull them in tighter. The hard moment will be when the soldier looks at us at the gate. If he is sleepy or busy our work will be easy. For we shall not bear much inspection."

He threw open his mantle, stepped between the two and caught up the chain and held it at his waist. "Now walk once about me, each of you," he said, "until the slack is out of the chain. Be sure that it is tight, and then cling to my neck **beneath** the folds of my coat."

They did this quickly, hope springing into each heart. "A

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ton you weigh," he said when they clung there, one on each side of him. "And now to your nests." Then swinging his huge arms, he wrapped the mantle about them. Had he been less than a giant he could not have considered such a feat; and had his cloak been in any way less than it was it would not have covered all three. But for the moment the three made a compact mass, the boys' heads nestling against his shoulder, their arms clutching at his thick neck.

"Out! Out!" The soldier was shouting.

"I come. I come," he answered, advancing to the door and passing through. Then, turning, he called into the darkness of the cell as if his charge were there: "Be a brave heart and say your prayers and all will come well with you."

"Oh what a mountain of fatness!" exclaimed the soldier with the key, throwing a quick glance at him as he came out, but not scrutinizing him closely since the light was poor and his brain was a bit muddled by the poet's drink. "Now come in a hurry," he shouted when he had locked the door.

The lamp was burning dim in the corridor. The other guard was at a distance peering into another cell. The soldier who had charge of him stamped past Stanislaus and turned the corner to the staircase urging the poet on. He followed panting. The sweat was already standing out in beads upon his brow. "I am hurrying," he called, following the soldier down the stairs. And then to himself, "That moment was dangerous, but it passed better than I hoped."

Before them lay the courtyard. The soldier with the key was hurrying. "Quick—quick—" he urged. Stanislaus stumbled on, groaning and panting. The chain that was caught about his waist had already begun to cut in. A sharp link at the back tortured him immeasurably. "Can I make it?" he thought. He lumbered past the church door. "A prayer. I must say a

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prayer," he mumbled, and falling on his knees whispered, "Stand upright for the moment. I must rest." The boys stooped down beside him under the cloak, their weight resting on the ground; this gave him a chance to ease his strained muscles and release the pressure of the sharp link which was cutting in deeper and deeper. He did not dare to pause long, for the soldier might come back to prod him, and if he in any way brushed the coat aside, then gone were all hopes of escape.

Up again and struggling. Slowly he crawled across the court. "Come. Come. Come," the soldier was shouting. He was a dangerously long distance ahead, and he might come back at any moment. "Coming," shouted Stanislaus, though now the very word came through his throat like a knife. The chain was binding his chest—it was hard to breathe and the weight and agony were increasing with every second. Every inch of progress seemed a mile, every foot a league; and once when he looked up thinking that the gate was just ahead he was startled at the immense distance away that the light seemed to be.

"I must keep to the farther side of the court opposite the lamp," he thought. "I have a chance in the darkness, but this bulk will not bear close inspection."

A little stream of blood began to trickle down his back. The iron link had cut into the flesh at last. "That is bad, if it strikes the ground," he thought. "They will be sure to notice it."

But he was drawing nearer to the light. The soldier had already reached it and had turned around. "Come on, you mountain," he was shouting. "I can't wait here all night." Another sentry came running up and joined with the soldier in conversation. "That saved me," thought the poet. "He will not come here to prod me."

He never knew how he made those last steps, crawling, dragging himself. But just before he reached the light he made a

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supreme effort and stood erect. His mantle, full for once, swept back a little at this moment, and he clutched it desperately in his right hand.

"Now by the blood of those who died for Poland I will do this thing," he muttered.

Step by step he came nearer to the two men. They were watching him curiously, but the light from the lamp was none too good, and at that moment a draught of air made the flame flicker and bend low.

"What a monster," said the first soldier. In the yellow smoky light cast by the flaring wick he seemed just that, a deformity of a man, grotesque, ill-shaped, ponderous.

"I know it," answered the other. "He can hardly drag himself along. When I took him to the prison I had to use my bayonet to make him move."

Stanislaus reached the corner of the archway. Passed it and passed into the shadow. "That's done," said the soldier with a yawn, taking the key from his blouse to return to the officer. "And go straight to your home. None are allowed on the street this night," he shouted after the poet.

Stanislaus muttered, "Thank you," but in his heart he said, "Thank God!"

There were but a few more paces to the place where the archway opened into the street. Whispering to the boys he said: "When I give you the word slip down to earth, and walk about me to unloosen your chain. Then take it in your hands and dart directly after me across the street through the arched gateway opposite. We are almost in safety."

Zygmunt's body began to tremble. He was suffering from terrific fright, but manfully held it in. "Now take it easy," Stanislaus consoled him. "We shall be there in a moment." The words brought a sense of exultation. What a feat this had

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been! To carry off bodily the two boys from under the very guns of the Muscovites. What a story it would make! What a poem! And who of his friends could ever dispute that this was one of the greatest deeds of modern times?

He had now reached the dark street and was about to give the word to the boys to descend when he heard a noise that sent the blood all out of his heart. Quick measured tramping some distance off. Soldiers were coming along the street from below.

What to do now? They might possibly reach the archway opposite in safety but the chances were that the soldiers would hear them and follow. Indeed it was almost certain that they would be taken since the boys' progress would be impeded by the iron chains. There was no by-street here to slip into, and while he still had Bek's pass, the boys under his coat were sure to be detected if a bright lantern were brought close enough to him. And sure enough, a lantern swung into view at that very moment, as the guard came nearer.

A sudden inspiration came to Stanislaus. "I will appeal to the Eternal Mother," he said. And turning he staggered around the corner where the wall bends sharply, and toiled up the slope of the street leading to the Ostra Brama. Fortunately he needed to take but a few steps before he was in sight of the shrine.

The sacred picture of the Madonna, over the Ostra Brama in Vilno, is one which pilgrims come from all eastern and central Europe to see. It has been there for several centuries—it has been revered by thousands of people. Hardly a day goes by in Vilno that one does not see the familiar sight of a pilgrimage—people carrying their belongings, marching from afar, led by their priest and by the cross borne aloft. Green boughs are carried, and at every step hymns of praise are sent up to God. And besides those who come to visit this Madonna to renew their faith as at a sacred fire, are those who have come to offer

“What have we here?” shouted the sergeant in command.

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up special prayers and to beseech certain mercies. There stands the picture high above the street, enclosed in the gate once a “sharp” gate but now rounded.

At once he was upon his knees. “Mother of Mercy, save me and those whom I protect. ‘Beneath Thy Protection’”—he repeated the words known from childhood, and once written in Polish upon that very gate, though at a later time effaced when the Russians wreaked their wrath upon the city.

The patrol was almost upon him. “What have we here? Bring the lantern,” shouted the sergeant in command.

“Cling close to my body. Wind your arms tight against my neck and close in with your feet,” whispered the poet to Zygmunt and Stefan.

They obeyed and he drew the coat more closely.

“An old man at his prayers,” he said aloud. “Would you disturb one who has not many years to live? I am here to ask grace for others besides myself.”

“We have orders to clear the street. We must take you to the barracks.”

“But I have a pass.”

“You can show that inside.”

“But, sir,” Stanislaus turned his face to the sergeant, “I ask you with all my heart not to disturb me now. I am at my prayers and I have not finished my devotions.”

The sergeant was about to reply angrily, but instead he paused unexpectedly. . . . (“Mother of Mercy, save us,” prayed Stanislaus.) . . . He glanced down at the kneeling poet, and then suddenly, as if obeying some subtle influence, ahead toward the shrine. He hesitated; for a moment it seemed to him as if all this picture were a dream—the light, the upturned face torn with agony, for so it was, and the holy picture above the gate where burned a single candle. It seemed to him in a swift

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burst of feeling as if the world stood absolutely still, as if the rushing which we call life had suddenly calmed. He seemed to be face to face for an instant with something that he could not explain.

"Then have your way," he said after a moment. "I would not disturb a man at his prayers. But if I find you here when I return I shall certainly take you to the barracks."

They passed on under the arch, but the sergeant, lingering for a moment behind, took off his hat and crossed himself after the fashion of his own church before he too disappeared in the dark.

"God be praised!" Stanislaus arose and opened his coat. The boys leaped down and seized up their chain. "Run like the wind after me and reach that house on the farther side of the street." They reached it breathless; the door was opened by an unseen hand and then quickly closed again. Stanislaus sank into a motionless heap just inside the door, but in a few minutes had regained his senses and composure and was ready for the next piece of work.



Interlude

IN the Russian capital of Petersburg on the Neva, Nicholas the Tsar—who wore the crown of Ivan the Terrible, of Peter the Great, and of Catherine—called a council of his diplomats and generals. When they were assembled in his palace his face paled with anger before them and he spoke in harsh, biting tones. “So this one thing that I have desired, this royal crown of Poland, no one of you may find. For a year I have sent emissaries and agents, I have paid spies, and I have dispatched even armies to locate this jewel for me. Is there no general with power enough to perform this thing? Is there no diplomat with skill enough to wring from men’s lips the secret of this powerless crown? Reports come to me from here, and reports come to me from there, and all say that they are upon the track of the crown but cannot lay hands upon it.”

A general bowed before him: “Your Greatness, we have searched high and low for this crown, indeed we have been through every city and town as with a comb. But we can find none who know for a certainty where the crown has been, nor

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any who will say where it might be. Our agents believe that Prince Chartoryski removed it to England after the revolution; I believe myself that it has left the country."

The storm of wrath grew thicker upon the Tsar's brows. "That is no such thing, for it is the secret of the crown that it may not leave the country. My armies have brought Poland low, they have stamped out all opposition to me—our Russian names adorn their rivers and cities, their street names are written in our own Cyrillic characters; before me all Poles are in subjection. And yet there is this one thing, this crown. It is a legend of old that Poland may not perish until the royal crown is lost. And I mean not the holiday crowns worn by the kings and queens for show and parade—I mean the royal crown by which the monarchs swore to uphold the kingly privilege of the land. This crown I want. I can never be ruler of Poland without it; though these people with lies upon their lips say that they are subject to me, yet they do not feel themselves subjects while this crown is still out of my possession."

"But, your Greatness, how may we know where this crown is to be found? It is not large and may be easily concealed, and none of us the wiser. Perhaps it is buried somewhere even now."

"That is not the truth. There is a Brotherhood in Poland which was formed to protect this crown. It is a Brotherhood which includes thousands of people—nobles, peasants, merchants; and all have sworn not to betray the secret of the whereabouts of the royal crown, even if they meet death on its account. The crown is being passed from man to man, from place to place, in this Brotherhood, until it reaches some final destination where it is to remain safely hidden. Torture, bribery, force, have all been used and yet to no purpose. We know that the crown was in Warsaw a month ago. Now it is gone, and we believe that

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it was sent north to the city of Vilno. Indeed reports given to me indicate that it has been there already, but carelessness, and blindness, and stupidity have let it slip out of our hands again."

"Your Greatness, we will go to Vilno and turn all our attention upon this search."

"Then go. Use all force, and every bit of wealth I have in the treasury, if need be, to find this crown. Take armies, spies, informers—take whatever you wish. For I must have this crown before it is lost forever."

The meeting was at an end, but another great drama had begun.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

AS soon as Stanislaus was on his feet again, voices began to murmur about him in the corridor. Among them was the voice of a woman, who came to him and touched him and kissed his hands in the darkness. "Your coat is wet," she said. "You must change."

Before he had time to reply all three were conducted into a little room at the end of the passage, the boys holding up their chain lest it clink against the floor or wall. A light was brought, and stools were pointed out for them to sit on, and in a moment a woman with a sad, white face came bringing bread and meat and a hot drink. They fell to zealously, Stanislaus most of all, for he had the most stomach, though Zygmunt had ten lean days in jail to make up for.

The woman suddenly exclaimed, "Your coat. It is wet—with blood."

Stanislaus tore off a huge piece of meat and put it in his mouth. "That is nothing. A bee bit me on the back when I was leaving the prison." But they stripped off his coat nevertheless and washed the wound and the woman put a fresh cloth upon it. "There," he said, "I am done up like an infant."

"When will you be ready?" The man who spoke was the same who had admitted him to the court earlier in the evening. "You cannot start too early for there will be a hue and cry when it is found that the boy is gone. You had hardly left us

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earlier in the evening when there came to us a deluge of news. This very night two full regiments are on the way from Petersburg to Vilno. A squadron of cavalry has been ordered here from Warsaw. . . . The Muscovites are upon the trail of all members of the Brotherhood, and I have information through underground channels that no stone will be left unturned to defeat our purpose. This boy is thought to have been in the company of our Warsaw rider. Therefore the country will be scoured to find him. You, too, may come under suspicion as you were seen at the blacksmith's shop that night. Therefore the sooner you are away the better."

"And what of you?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "They have taken from me all that life holds dear. They can take nothing now but my life."

The poet burst into tears. "Do not talk like that. Come with us. We will take refuge in the forest, and thence escape abroad. It will be death for you to remain here."

"No. I must stay. I have an even chance for escape, for as yet no one has word of any one of our refuge places. However, things will be different now for the number of spies will be tripled, and so much money will be held out to informers that one cannot tell who will succumb to the temptation and betray us. But there will be much work to do—the Brotherhood's trust is at present secure, though it is not yet finally disposed of."

"When will that be?"

"I am not sure. It depends much upon occasion and circumstance. At present the rider and the charcoal burner are following one of two paths we know to the center of the forest. Another horseman is coming up to meet them from the south to take the package back with him. But as that will not be for several days I am rather afraid that with the doubling of guards

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everywhere it may be impossible for him to get through the lines."

"In that case?"

"The package must rest at the center of the forest."

Stanislaus thought a moment. "If this horseman fails to come, why can I not take the package to the south? I need not return here."

The man beat with his knuckles upon the right side of his head. "You might—the idea is good. Do you know the country?"

"I was brought up as a child in the district of Novogrodek. I know the country clear through the Lvov."

"Excellent." He drew a paper from his pocket and sketched a little map upon it. "From the blacksmith shop you go by the road to the right into the wooded hills. Continue along them until you come to the forest. Then strike around the edge of the forest until you come here." He marked an X on the paper. "You will find the entrance to a path through the woods at this point. This other paper will give you the details." He handed him a slip of paper, which Stanislaus folded and put inside his great coat. "The destination of the package you know."

"We all know that," said Stanislaus, rising.

"If ever you are in danger of being caught, bury the package as well as you can, and keep the spot in mind."

"I shall not be caught," said the poet.

Stefan's eyes were closing with exhaustion when they told him that he must make ready for another trip.

"There is no chance here to remove the chain," the man said to him. "You must go back to the blacksmith shop and have it taken off there. From the smithy you must go to the charcoal burner's and hide until there is a cart to take you across the frontier. It would be much easier to go to Prussia, but the

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escapes have been so frequent that the guards are as thick there as flies in summer. Besides, there is not so much suspicion attached to a cart going south as one going north or west."

"And Zygmunt?"

The man looked at the other boy thoughtfully. "He must go by a different route. I will supply him with money and he can wear the clothes of a peasant boy. In fact I know a man who is crossing the border in a day or two. If you will leave him in the farmhouse just this side of the blacksmith shop I will see that he is taken care of."

Zygmunt smiled up at him. The warmth and friendship had revived his spirits, and now after eating he was ready for anything.

Stanislaus sprang up from his seat. "And now we will go. The sooner we are on the way the better. For Bek may get free of his cords somehow, or again they may miss you at the prison. Come," he led the way out of the room as if he were already well acquainted with the house and its rooms and passages. The man embraced him for the last time.

"For the Brotherhood," he said.

"For the Brotherhood," echoed Stanislaus.

The woman had placed rags about the boys' legs where the fetters had already begun to be painful, and each boy, to keep the chain from rattling, carried the folded links in his hands. Leaving the man and woman behind, they followed Stanislaus out of the room and down a flight of stairs into a small court. On the farther side of the court another passageway opened. All lights were carefully extinguished here, and they moved forward slowly in the darkness.

"Not a word," whispered the poet. "And keep your heads low."

The passageway was low, indeed they almost crawled

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through it. In its narrowest place Stanislaus was actually obliged to crawl, and once he had to squeeze tightly in order to get through. The flat stones in the floor were very smooth, as if there had been much travel over them, and they were very old.

"We are beneath the street." Stanislaus went ahead cautiously, feeling every foot of the way. "Here it is said the Bashlychek once lived," he muttered as the passageway opened into a kind of cavern. Both boys knew the story of the mythical monster who was said to have inhabited this hill in old times; the monster who was so terrible that he killed people simply by looking at them, and met his downfall when a bright youth conceived the idea of holding up a mirror in front of him so that he might see himself and perish by his own look.

All at once the air became fresher. Stefan gulped it in and felt the exhilaration which a cool draught brings. Then stars were visible and they were on the hillside above the Vileyka River, the little river from which the city took its name. Between them and Subotch street was a high wall, along which Stanislaus crept, through a garden rich in flowers and vegetables. At the lower extremity of the wall, for they were descending the hill, they could see the towers of a church rising in the air. They skirted the church and came upon the road. Here a cart was waiting, an ordinary farmer's cart built upon one pole, and drawn by a single horse with a high wooden yoke-collar. Stanislaus boosted them inside, and then pushed straw and matting over them.

"Lie comfortably," he said, "and the journey will soon be over." The cart rattled on the stones and then jolted along the softer road at the city's edge. The driver had said nothing to them at all but merely swung his whip now and then or muttered something to his horse in an undertone. Stanislaus

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crouched in the space beneath the driver's seat, his huge feet prodding Stefan with every jolt of the cart.

They traveled along for what seemed hours. The night was cool, but the straw and matting made a warm covering. Zygmunt fell asleep quickly, his hand in Stefan's, but Stefan, tired though he was, did not sleep at all, his thoughts running over the events of the day and the escape from the prison.

"My mother—how glad she will be!" he thought, 'and the blacksmith too. They never expected to see me again' The rolling motion of a Polish peasant's cart is not disagreeable to those accustomed to it. It has a vibration that does not make one dizzy but instead seems to cause a kind of exhilaration. And how hungry one gets after miles of such travel! Stefan fell into the motion of the cart easily, as he had driven one himself many times, and would have been asleep long before the journey was half over, had not his mind been so full.

All at once the cart stopped. "Can we be here?" he thought. His eyes now used to the darkness scanned the hills about. "Yes, there is the hill above the blacksmith shop. There is the pine wood where the brook trickles through." And peering into the dark he could distinguish the dim outlines of Peter's house and shop.

They descended from the cart, Zygmunt clinging to him. Stanislaus ran ahead to tap upon the high shutters to arouse the blacksmith and his wife. No one answered, and he searched in the dirt until he found a stone and pounded again. Stefan with Zygmunt came along slowly and waited.

"There is no one there," said Stanislaus, "or else they are sleeping more soundly than smith ever slept in these turbulent days." He pounded again.

But again there was no reply.

"We must get in," said the poet. "The time is slipping

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away." He turned an anxious glance on the road they had just come over as if expecting to hear the beat of horses' hoofs. There was no sound there—only blackness lay over everything, and even the night birds were silent.

"What to do?" Stanislaus came back to Stefan. "Do you know any way to get into the shop? There must be a back door—"

"There is," exclaimed the boy, "if you can manage it. Go round the house to the farther corner, opposite the well. Feel along the wall next to the corner—the rear wall, just above the ground. You will find there an opening. Put your hand in the opening and you will catch hold of a cord. Pull this cord; the cord lifts a latch, and a small section will swing out. You must crawl through the opening."

Stanislaus felt his way around the shop, while the boy stood pondering on the unexplained absence of the smith. Could anything have happened? Could the Russians have taken him prisoner again, and had they taken his wife prisoner too? But his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the opening of the small door in the rear. Stanislaus had found the place. Stefan and Zygmunt heard him enter the smithy and tug loose the door bars. The front door creaked and opened. In a moment the two boys had crossed the threshold.

Stanislaus ran out to the road where the driver still sat in the wagon. "Drive out on that little road which leads to the woods," he directed him, "round to the right. Then lead the horse in among the trees and wait for me." Returning to the smithy he shut the door again and bolted it. "Now for work!" he exclaimed.

Stefan interposed. "I know the quickest way to release this chain. Heat it in the middle and cut it in two with chisel and hammer while it is still soft and glowing. Then take a file and

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work loose the ring on Zygmunt's leg. I will attend to mine if you will but cut us apart. . . . There should be a fire in the forge; the coals are never out." He drew Zygmunt over to the furnace and held his hand over the coals.

"Cold!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "What can have happened to the smith? This fire is always banked and kept alive at night. Now it has been out for a long time."

Hampered somewhat by the chain, he set to work as quickly as he could to rebuild it. He shook out the dead coals from below, threw in a quantity of chips, and took down the flint and steel from a shelf above. *Click-click-click*—a flash and a bit of smoke in the tinder. A blaze crawls out and the tinder is among the chips. They catch and burn merrily. He covers them with charcoal, and pulls gently upon the bellows.

And now the coals are red and the iron chain is laid upon them. Zygmunt stands upon one side of the anvil and he on the other. A heavy chisel rests upon the glowing link. Crash—it is severed, and the boys are cut apart.

Stefan leaps for the file rack and takes down two large instruments. By the light of the coals he adjusts the edge of one to the band about his leg. Stanislaus in imitation does the same with the other to the band which holds Zygmunt. The air is full of the rasping of metal upon metal.

"Blood of a dog—I'd rather be a poet than a smith!" exclaimed Stanislaus after a few minutes of work. "My fingers are on fire from this accursed thing."

Stefan looked at his work and laughed. "You are using the wrong edge of the file. See—this way." He took the file and worked it back and forth until its teeth began to show a line upon the iron. "That is the way. See how it bites." He forgot his own task for the moment, but finished with Zygmunt. The circlet bent apart, split, hung by an edge, and was off. Off!

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The boy rubbed his ankle and danced for joy. In a moment Stefan had freed himself and joined in the dance.

Stanislaus let them enjoy themselves for a moment, until they turned on him and covered him with their caresses. "Out!" he shouted, throwing them off suddenly. "We are not yet out of the woods. Nor in them either," he ejaculated. "We have many miles to go."

In very joy at being free the boys wanted to run outside the smithy, but this he forbade. "Your feet will have enough to do before long," he told them. Then returning to the mystery of the moment he exclaimed, "I don't understand this about the smith. Had there been any one in the house we would have known it long before this. But I am sure that neither he nor his wife is in any trouble or I should have heard."

Stefan stopped short in his glee. For the moment, in the very ecstasy of freedom, he had forgotten that the smith was not in his house. And where could the smith's wife be? In a last desperate attempt to rouse them—and they would certainly have been roused had they been there—he pounded upon the partition wall between the shop and house with a great piece of iron. The ensuing noise would have awakened the dead. "No," he exclaimed, throwing down the iron. "They are certainly not in the house."

"No," Stanislaus sank upon the bench. "I am trying to figure it out. By all rights the blacksmith should be here. You said that he was here yesterday with his wife when the Russians took you away. But where can he be now?"

After a while he stood up. "Now, Zygmunt, I must take you to a neighbor's house, and in a day or two you will be across the border. This is to provide for you," and he handed him the pouch of gold pieces which the man in the city had given him. "When you are across the border make for Leipzig in

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the German country. You will find many exiles there, and we shall join you before long."

Zygmunt seized Stefan's hands and kissed them, then burst into a flood of tears. "I cannot leave you. I cannot. Can I not go with you?"

"No," said Stanislaus, separating them. "It is not safe. Have no uneasiness, however. The man you saw in the house by the gate will take care of you as he promised, and we shall all be together again before long. . . . Meanwhil—be a man. Poland needs such." And with these words he turned toward the fire. "Put out the fire while we are gone, Stefan," he said, "and hide the chains. I will return quickly."

There was a long embrace between the boys and they separated. Stefan wet down the coals with water from the bucket, and covered the whole pile with ashes. The chains he threw into a basket half full of scraps of metal and odd lengths of chain.

In a few minutes the poet was back. "Whew—there is much afoot," he whispered. "We must leave this place at once. Our next-door neighbor, who as you know is one of the Brotherhood, says that Peter and Father Jan left here some hours ago, together with Vitold and the horseman. That the fire was extinguished shows that the smith did not intend to return in a hurry. His wife is safe in a neighboring house, but I did not dare to take the time to see her. The boy is tucked away in the haymow next door, where he will remain until to-morrow or the next day and then start for the border. And now you and I must separate."

He closed the huge door tightly, shot the bolt into place and then turned to Stefan.

"Make your way on foot to Vitold's in the forest with what provisions you can find in the smith's larder. I must

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go by another path, but it will not be long before we meet again."

Stefan mounted the bench and opened a cupboard where the smith always kept a supply of food. He took out two loaves and some meat, which he divided with Stanislaus, and then faced the poet to say good-by.

"Till we meet again." They blessed each other amidst tears, and then left the smithy by the opening in the rear of the shop. Stanislaus strode across the marshy place by the brook and took the road there which led to the right. Stefan went straight around the shop and struck off to the left.

And now the smell of dawn was in the air and little clouds were catching the gold of early morning.

CHAPTER IX

THE ATTACK ON THE HOUSE IN THE WOODS

THE sun came over the edge of the earth as Stefan trudged along, driving away from his sleepy eyes the drowsiness that came upon him. He avoided the middle of the road at first, but later, seeing that no one was about, chose the smoothest part where the horses had trodden down the dirt. In his mind the thoughts came whirling from one thing to another—the stranger, Bek, the jail, Stanislaus, the bog in the forest. More, he thought, had been packed into two days than he had ever known in his life before. And now there was the new mystery, the disappearance of his foster father. What could this mean? That Peter had gone for good? No—that could not be it. His wife was still in the village and he certainly would not leave her behind.

The creaking of wheels sounded behind him. He darted into the trees at the edge of the wood, only to assure himself that the wheels belonged to a peasant cart, and then came out to ask the driver for a ride. The peasant was a cheerful sort, greeted him with the old greeting, "May Jesus Christ be praised," and at the response, "To the Ages of Ages," invited Stefan to ride along with him. He was away to a neighboring village, and Stefan accompanied him for several hours. Later in the morning another cart carried him to the edge of the forest, and there he had the great fortune to meet Kuba, the charcoal

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burner's boy, returning from an errand in the opposite direction, and as he turned into the forest road, Stefan leaped in behind him.

The charcoal burner had gone away somewhere with the horseman—that Kuba told him. Of other matters he knew nothing. He was not loquacious, and for that quality Stefan was grateful, for it enabled him to sleep on the bottom of the cart. When he awoke it was late evening; an owl was hooting somewhere; the pine needles gave out a strong fragrance, and he knew that they were well into the forest. A few minutes later, Lilia came shouting to Kuba.

Stefan stood up and waved to her. At first she could not quite make out who he was, and stood perfectly still, like a little statue. Then he called and the spell was broken. She came forward rapidly and jumped up into the cart beside him.

"I am so glad that you have come. But you do not bring news of Father?"

"They have all gone somewhere together—he and the horseman, the blacksmith and Father Jan. Stanislaus learned that they left the smithy late last evening. They must be going far, because the smith had put out the fire in the forge."

Lilia was listening intently. "He told me that he might be gone for several days. But have you come for charcoal? No, I might have known—you have no cart. But why—"

"Lilia, I have come to hide. On my return home yesterday I was arrested and taken to Vilno." . . . He told her the whole story.

"And you came to us? . . . Stefan, if the matter is as important as you think, the soldiers may come here after you." Her eyes were wide in her concern for his safety.

"Yes, perhaps—but no one knows that I am here."

"Did no one see you upon the road?"

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"A few peasants. But none of them knew where I was going."

She thought deeply. "I have an idea." The cart stopped in front of the house and they jumped out. "The soldiers *will* come here. I somehow fear it. And they may come in the night when we are asleep. Now, over there near the edge of the forest is a little house where the men stay sometimes when they come to help with wood. I can fix up a bed there and fill the place with something to eat. . . . You will be comfortable and safe. I must tell Kuba and Janek to say nothing about you to anyone. I will have them put the bed there now."

They ate together in the house, and then a bed was dragged into the shed, and she brought in bread and meat. "That will keep for a day or two," she said. "I will bring other food to-morrow. You must always have something near you in case you are obliged to hide in the woods. For see," she threw open a rear door in the shed, "this opens directly into the forest. I will try to warn you in time if the soldiers come." Later she came to the shed bringing a little oil lamp and a musket of her father's with a belt containing powder and bullets. "You may need all these, and again you may not. But it is better to be prepared."

The next day was one of the happiest of his life. Lilia came to him early and they talked together for hours, throwing themselves on the fragrant carpet of grass and moss in front of the little house. Later in the morning they took some books of the charcoal burner's to a place where the trees made a little arbor overhead, and read during the heat of the day.

"What will you be when you are older?" she asked once when he had laid his book aside. "Will you go on to the university and finish your studies?"

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"That I do not know. The university is closed. I would be a doctor could I continue. As it is, I know not."

She clasped her hands about her knees. "Then I should emigrate. You can return when the trouble is over and practice among your own people. Besides, the day may come when Poland will be free," and she fell to dreaming.

At length sleep overpowered him. As on that previous day he threw himself back against a tree and shut his eyes. When he opened them it was past noon. Kuba was calling. The dinner was ready. Again there came a golden afternoon, full of dreams and happiness and tales of olden time from the books of Vitold.

That day sped so soon. As he looked back upon this time, in later life, it seemed as if he had never been happier. At the supper hour Kuba blew a horn.

There were clouds in the sky when he went back to the shed. A wind was springing up and dusk was coming earlier than was its wont. The air grew cooler, and in the distance lightning began to play across the surface of the clouds.

"A storm," he thought and threw the door to.

But almost instantly there came a rapping upon it. He thought at first that it was the wind but it was repeated quickly. He threw the door open, and there stood Lilia. The wind had already risen a little and her hair was tossing. He could see even in the dim light that she was pale.

"Stefan, there are people in the wood."

"What?" he exclaimed. "At this hour? And a storm coming?"

"Yes. The dogs are growling, and the birds are making a great noise below near the road. Kuba has gone out to see. He will be here directly."

As she spoke Kuba came running. "Soldiers!" he shouted.

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"Soldiers!" and almost instantly turned about and ran into the woods near the road.

"Stefan, I am frightened," she said. "I don't know what to do. Shall I go back to the house?"

"No," he answered. "Stay with me here at the forest's edge and we will wait."

They went out from the shed and stationed themselves among the trees; between them and the house was a low hedge of brush over which they could see plainly, and above their heads was a small, crude roof built about three trees, an invention of Janek for shelter from the rain when he was caught by a shower while working near by. Thus they were inclosed by shadows, and invisible from beyond, and the dark and lowering sky was also a protection to them.

Then there came the sound of rolling wheels from below and in a moment the first horse appeared at the farther edge of the clearing. One could see but indistinctly, but the black mass in the wagon indicated that it was full of men. A second wagon rolled up the road, a third, and a fourth, all loaded with soldiers. Suddenly they stopped.

The two dogs, who had been tugging at their chains and growling viciously, very sensibly became quiet in the face of this small army, and satisfied themselves thereafter with an occasional repressed yip of rage.

"Surround the house," came a command in Russian. In a trice a ring of soldiers with bayonets affixed to muskets encircled it. An officer, with a sergeant and two privates, went up to the front door and pounded. Janek stuck his head out of a window.

"What do you want?"

"We want to come in. Open the door."

Janek obeyed. Instantly he was seized by the soldiers, one of whom placed himself on guard over him in the kitchen. The

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officer and the sergeant, accompanied by the other soldier, went on through the house; a light was struck and they began to poke into everything. Chairs were overturned, desk drawers pulled out and their contents scattered; the books were thrown out of the bookcase, and everything was kicked into a heap in the middle of the room.

They searched every inch of the study, the kitchen and Lilia's bedroom, not disdaining to wreck everything in the room. But apparently dissatisfied with this search they went back to the kitchen to question Janek.

"Has a boy Stefan Kovalevski been hiding here?"

"No, no one has been hiding in this house."

"You are lying. He has been here."

"There is no one in this house but me."

"Then where is he?"

"I do not know."

"Who lives here?"

"Vitold the charcoal burner."

"Where is he?"

"I do not know. He left two days ago to look over a new plot of woods. He does not tell me his business. I am only a servant."

The officer thought for a minute. "Perhaps he is right." Then, "Take him to a cart and bind him. We can let no chance slip through our hands. I must do a thorough job here or there will be the devil to pay." The other soldier led Janek away.

"Sergeant. Do you think it likely that the boy ever came here?"

"We had it on good information, your excellency. Peasants saw him on the road, and this is where he would naturally come."

"He may be hiding between the ceiling and roof somewhere, then. Smoke him out."

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"Orders, your excellency." The sergeant saluted.

But at this minute there came a loud cry from outside. Janek had broken from the soldier's grasp and at full speed was making for the woods at the farther corner of the clearing, where stood a cluster of beehives. A number of soldiers who had been guarding the house set out in pursuit to cut him off, and reached him just as he slipped in among the hives. Now the Polish beehive is a rather extensive affair; it consists of a hollow log placed upright on a small box or platform, with the entrance for the bees near the bottom of the log. Five or six soldiers had almost laid their hands upon Janek when he kicked out viciously and brought down two of the largest hives upon their very heads. He was out of danger like a flash himself, and safe in the woods; but the soldiers, bewildered, lingered a fatal second, and in the next second were screaming in pain and distress, for the vengeance of the bee is quick and effective.

Forgotten was the pursuit. In their distress the men ran in forty different directions. Two soldiers, carrying a veritable swarm each, plunged into the nearest cart where a reserve guard was waiting, perhaps ten men, and in quicker time than one could realize, the cartful of soldiers had also joined in the confusion. A musket went off somewhere and the men in the other carts leaped to the ground to join the guard at the house, thinking that they had been attacked, and ran directly into another cloud of bees; for a Polish hive contains as many bees as five ordinary hives, and this was the time of year when they were most combative since they had a new large store of honey to protect.

But the sergeant had already tossed the lighted lamp which he held into the pile of Vitold's books on the study floor, and the flame, running along the flowing oil, had seized upon the paper and bindings. From them it leaped to the curtains and

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walls, and in a moment the room was blazing like a furnace. "If there is any one here he must come out now or be scorched alive," exclaimed the officer and rushed to the door to see what was happening.

It was now quite dark. In the clearing soldiers were running about like mad, crying out in pain and falling into new-made gardens and tripping over each other. Stefan and Lilia could not imagine what was going on; they stood close together in the little retreat, their hearts beating with apprehension, their muscles tense. Then suddenly a flash of lightning from the coming storm lit up the curious scene, and a tongue of flame from the fire kindled by the sergeant in the house crept out into the darkness.

"Janek has escaped," exclaimed Lilia. "He went there by the hives. They will never catch him once he reaches the forest." Another blinding flash lit up the scene, followed by a crash of thunder, and in that moment she sensed what had happened. "He has overturned the beehives," she said. "The soldiers are fighting the bees."

But now they had no more need to wait for lightning. The window of Vitold's study burst open with a crash, and smoke and flames belched forth. "Stefan! Stefan! They have set fire to the house. . . . What shall we do? What shall we do?"

"Wait," he said. "If they remain there we can escape to the woods. But there is more to this, I think."

The officer was screaming at the top of his voice. "Stand still, you crazy fools. What is the matter?" The sergeant dashed out toward them but came back quickly, brushing madly at his face. "Bees"—slap—"the air is full of them. Some one has overturned a hive."

"Fools!" shouted the officer, keeping his distance from the



"They have set fire to the house."

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men, however. "Fools—" Then turning toward the burning house he shouted, "Come out, if you are inside. In two minutes the whole house will be ablaze." But there was no reply.

"He thinks I am there," whispered Stefan.

The flames ran up the sides of the cottage and darted along the roof. Smoke began to roll out in volumes, with the sharp crackling of burning thatch and the sound of falling beams giving expression to the fury of the fire. Soon from the very center of the roof came a red glow like the sun in early morning; terribly it shone through the clouds of black smoke as if combating them, and then burst them asunder and leaped to the sky—a huge tongue of flame.

"It will set the woods on fire. We have had no rain," said Lilia in terror. "Can they see us here, Stefan?"

"I think not." He gazed in awe upon that magnificent though terrible spectacle. "And besides, the soldiers are too much occupied in getting rid of their bees."

Most of the men were rolling on the ground, pulling their coats about their faces. Others, hurrying through the near-by woods, had found a small stream and were lying flat in the bed. But they presently had no need for either of these means of escaping their tormentors, for suddenly the wind fell upon the clearing with a rush, and the gates of the storm broke. It came with a flash of light and a crash of thunder, and for a moment there was no sound of soldiers to be heard.

"That will drive off the bees," thought Stefan.

The rain did not extinguish the fire in the house, however. It seemed only to intensify it, as if beating down the flames as they rose in the air confined them to the walls of the dwelling beneath. The wind fed them with fuel as if oil had been poured in, and though the smoke rose more and more, the glow within did not diminish. And with a clap of thunder, as if trying to

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rival that powerful noise the roof and walls fell inward in a piece, and sent up a cloud of brilliant sparks to heaven.

"They were fools," Stefan said to Lilia, "to burn the house before the storm broke. If they had waited they would have had shelter."

The officer realized it too. "Crawl under those carts," he called to his men, "and keep dry if you can." Then with the sergeant he made for an outhouse where the horses were kept. The house continued to blaze despite the storm, so that Stefan could see what was going on, and the sight of the officer making for the outhouse gave him an idea.

"Wait here a moment," he whispered to Lilia. "You will be dry here beneath this platform. I will return at once."

"Do not go," she exclaimed in alarm. The flames lit up her face. She was as pale as death, but as yet the shock of terror and the fear of being discovered had crowded grief for the loss of her home from her mind. "I cannot stay alone."

"I shall be but a minute," he encouraged her.

On hands and knees he crept to the edge of the brush, and at a favorable moment darted through to the little shed. In an instant he gathered up the loaves of bread and the meat that Lilia had brought there and tossed them into a hunting bag that hung on the wall. Then he strapped about his waist the hunting belt loaded with leaden bullets and powder, and slung the musket over his shoulder. In a moment he was back at the girl's side.

She was sobbing now as if her heart would break. The realization of all that this destruction meant had begun to come home to her. Gone was her home and shelter from the world; her bedroom which housed her modest treasures was only a few charred beams and ashes. The forest cottage about which happiness and peace had lingered since her earliest days was

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now among the things which had been, and she with her father were homeless outcasts in a great unfriendly world.

"Come," said Stefan, putting his arm about her shoulders. "We will see this righted yet."

And now the storm broke about them in all its fury. The wind howled, the trees swayed and groaned, and the lightning with almost constant play lit up the whole sky with its flashes of green and blue. The rain driven before the wind fell in a slanting cataract, and where it struck the dry earth it was greedily sucked beneath the surface. Through the forest the thunder roared like a great animal—it was the voice of the great God Perkun crying out in wrath at the cruelty and brutality of men. Then branches began to break and crash off to the ground in the wind, and now and then in the distance came the thunder of a fallen tree.

All at once the clearing was lighted with a flash that was more brilliant than day. Little flames that seemed alive played about in the air and ran into the trees. A huge ball of fire, choosing the loftiest oak near the edge of the forest, fell upon it with the roar of a million battles and, reinforced by the mightiest gale of the driving storm, hurled it across the earth as a child might hurl a stick. It clung desperately to its roots, felt them loosening, felt the bolts of fire that ran deep into the ground, struck out desperately with its branches to gain support from above, but in vain, and then like a Titan struck with the fury of the gods plunged headlong carrying with it a hundred lesser trees. Its fall shook the ground—it seemed to wail in anguish—and the cries of birds nested in its branches continued its uproar when the earth-shaking crash had ended.

Stefan and Lilia stood like statues. The fire of the lightning had been in their eyes, the shock of its force had torn them

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apart. Forgotten now were all things else, in the blast of the bolt and the crash of the fallen tree.

And almost with its mightiest blast the storm came to an end. The violence of the elements lessened, the wind sank, the rain came more gently, and though the play of lightning still lit the skies, the roll of the thunder was already distant.

"That tree came down not far away," exclaimed Stefan, recovering his senses. "I must go to see." He did not, however, for he heard at that minute the sergeant shouting to the soldiers to come out from beneath the carts.

"The storm is over," he was shouting. "Come out and form lines."

With smarting eyes and bodies, where the bees had left each man a souvenir, the soldiers lined up near the ruins of the charcoal burner's house. In a moment, when the rain had ceased entirely and a few stars began to show, the officer came from his retreat and faced the men.

"Take lights and search the woods near by," he commanded. "The boy cannot have gotten away far."

The sergeant arranged them in groups, and set about assigning directions. He had it so planned that not an inch of the woods near the house would escape scrutiny. And then lanterns were lighted, a few took pine torches from their blouses where they had protected them from the rain, and all spread quickly to the woods, while the officer walked back and forth in front of the burned house where now and then a little flame poked its head out from the dampened ashes.

"I must accomplish something," he said to himself. "The whole staff is awaiting my return and I can leave no stone unturned. I am even threatened with loss of rank if anything goes amiss here. And yet what ill luck I have had! The boy not in the house, a servant escapes because of a swarm of bees,

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and a storm delays me by nearly half an hour. I must accomplish something. There will be no excuse for failure."

Stefan felt a panic in his heart. "We are trapped," he thought. "They cannot fail to find us. We must go as far as we can into the forest."

He touched Lilia. "We must go on," he said. "There are soldiers quite close now."

They left the shelter of the roof and crept farther into the woods. Beyond them lay the bog, treacherous and dark, and quite impassable. Suddenly a soldier called from somewhere behind them in the brush. "There is a shelter here. I think some one has been this way."

Other soldiers came running. "Quick," Stefan whispered to Lilia.

They were now at the oaks which grew up above the old Lithuanian path. "If we could but cross that bog," he thought to himself. But in the next moment his heart leaped with joy. "Lilia," he exclaimed under his breath. "Feel—the oak that the lightning struck was one of these. I think it has fallen across the bog."

He mounted the trunk of the tree and crept along it. Sure enough, the oak lay like a bridge connecting the beginning of the path with the continuation which they had seen beyond. "We are safe!" he cried. "The soldiers do not know of the path and will think that the bog continues in this direction." He helped Lilia up on the trunk of the fallen monarch of the woods, and together they fought their way through its branches, stepping aside here, climbing there, and yet making progress.

"Here's a fallen tree." A soldier had reached the end of the oak. "Black as pitch, and can't see a thing. . . . Ho—give me your hand—I'm in the bog." Others came running up and he was extricated. "Can't go that way," said the sergeant

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who was with them. "They'd be lost in that mud. It seems to extend in both directions."

They went away.

A prayer of thankfulness in his heart, Stefan guided the girl forward along the great trunk. Then suddenly he put out his foot and felt the solid path beneath him.

"We are saved," he said, and a prayer from his heart went up to God.

CHAPTER X

IN THE LITHUANIAN FOREST

BUT there was no time now to rejoice or mourn. The mere length of an oak tree separated them from their enemies. Feeling for the huge trees on either hand Stefan took a few steps ahead and whispered back:

"Come on. I am in the path between the oaks."

He waited until she had come up to him and then went ahead again. In a few minutes they had gone some little distance. The stone path was firm beneath their feet, but they knew that a step to one side meant the bog and trouble. But both were used to the woods, and moved swiftly along. With their hands upon the trees lining the way they kept themselves in safety.

All at once there was the sound of a musket-shot some distance behind. It was followed by others. Stefan stopped. "They have found nothing and are signaling to the soldiers to return. But we must put still more distance between ourselves and them."

He was off again, moving as fast as he could. The rifle on his shoulder hindered him at times as it caught on tree boughs or bushes, and he was tempted to throw it away. But a realization that a wild, untrodden forest lay ahead made him decide to keep it. The path they were in was not always easy to follow. They came to a place where a tree younger than the others had grown through the stone path and spread the stones apart. Stefan felt his way around it and held out his hand to Lilia,

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who caught it and followed. In another place a fallen tree lay straight across the way, but Stefan scrambled over it, through its tangled branches, and then held them apart that Lilia might follow. Then came a wilderness of brush which made the going harder, but the old oaks at the side were constant guides and kept them in the path.

They moved along slowly for hours. "It must be near midnight," Stefan thought. "We have but a few hours to dawn."

Two tree trunks ahead had grown so fat with age that they seemed to close the path. There were no low boughs and again his foot struck soft mud when he attempted to go around. "Here," exclaimed Lilia, who had been groping at his feet, "there is an open place near the ground where the trunks have not joined." She crept through, and he started to follow, but the gun on his shoulder held him back. Unloosing it, he handed it through the hole and Lilia took it, and then he crept through and rejoined her on the other side. And with plenty of such adventures as these they went on for many hours more.

All at once the stars above the narrow path dimmed, the darkness began to lift and a grayness spread over the sky. They could now avoid the low branches that struck at their faces from the sides, and the prickly vines, and the brush underfoot; and soon patches of sky above them seemed streaked with lines of red and yellow. These gave way to red, and more red, and then all at once day leaped into the sky. The trees to right and left seemed suddenly shot with fire and gold, a chorus of a thousand birds began to chirp and twitter. Little animals darted across the path in front of them and behind, and pools of water began to steam as if they were boiling.

And then Stefan saw that the bog had come to an end. On either side of them, in the morning light sifting through the trees, appeared patches of green turf and moss, and here and

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there open places that invited them to stop. He fought off the temptation to throw himself down, for he knew that the moss was wet and that the farther they could go the better before they should rest at the end. With redoubled pace they followed the lines of oak trees, stepping aside with safety here and there where newer trees blocked the way, or climbing through brush where the path disappeared beneath.

It was perhaps nine o'clock in the morning that he decided to halt. By the side of the path bubbled a little spring and all about, fallen trees offered a place of repose and rest. He took off his pouch and laid it upon a trunk; unstrapped the gun and placed it beside it. Then telling Lilia that she could rest safely now, he threw himself into the arms of a huge fallen pine and almost instantly his tortured eyelids closed themselves in sleep. When he awoke the air was much warmer. Lilia was sleeping soundly on some boughs near-by, and the sun was shining down directly through the line of oak trees. "It must be near noon," he thought.

Without waking the girl he took a loaf of bread from the pouch and broke it in two. Half of it he returned to the case, the other he divided again. Then throwing himself down before the spring he drank and drank, for his throat was parched. Lilia awoke at this minute and called to him. He brought her some water in his cap and gave her a piece of bread. They ate in silence for some minutes.

Then she went to the spring and bathed her face. When she turned about to him she was smiling. The sight did his heart good, for he had been grieving about her feelings. It was he who was directly the cause of all this misfortune—it was because of the search for him that the house had been burned, and on his account that all the relics of her childhood had been destroyed. But she, with that sensitiveness which marks Polish

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and Lithuanian people, perceived this and had apparently resolved in her heart to put the past behind her utterly.

"Stefan," she asked, "where do you suppose this path leads?"

The same question had been knocking at the door of his brain ever since they had started on their flight. Many things had already suggested themselves to him, but he had an answer ready for her.

"I believe that this path goes straight through the forest. If it does not run the length of the woods, as I think it does, then at some point farther on it turns and goes out to the edge. It was apparently built for some reason, and it must lead somewhere."

"But does it not seem incredible to you that such a path could exist?"

"It does. Yet here is the path. It must have taken hundreds of men years to build such a thing; to line such a path with oak trees must have taken centuries. But yet I have read somewhere that in the early days before the Lithuanians came out into the fields they had great dwelling places in these woods—yes, and buildings and temples too. To reach these places there must have been paths similar to this. Unless this path was made to lead to such a place, it may have been a simple thoroughfare through the forest, used by hunters and trappers in ancient times to save them from the bogs and marshes. Perhaps that bog at the end has always existed and served as a defense against enemies, just as it served as a defense for us against the Russians."

"And once we reach the edge of the forest what can we do?"

"Hide there until friends can take us to the border. I know that we shall find friends somewhere near the edge of the forest—Polish people making their way through to the border—who will know that Peter, my foster father, is a member of the

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Brotherhood, just as your father is, and then there will be plenty of people to give us help."

She needed only this encouragement, and never again on that long trip did she doubt a successful outcome to their adventure.

Later in the afternoon, when they were on the march again, Stefan suddenly loaded Vitold's rifle with powder and ball and primed it for a shot. "We will have hare for supper," he exclaimed and the forest echoed with the report, as a fat hare fell kicking just to the left of the path a short distance ahead.

Before darkness fell he selected a spot in which to spend the night, and prepared the hare for cooking. With mint and steel and powder he set fire to the small branches and cones that they had gathered and piled up in a little clearing. Soon the flames were snapping about the fagots, and pieces of meat pierced with sticks were held in the coals. Cooked crisp and brown it was delicious, with the hunger of the day upon them, and the zest of the open air. There was meat in abundance, and what if the bread was dry? The appetite of youth is not particular.

Before they went to sleep he piled the fire with logs, and heaped moss about it in a circle to keep it from spreading. At this place the trees were not heavily branched and there was no danger of sparks lighting on them. Then—he upon the ground beside the fire, where the heat had dried the moss, and Lilia upon the farther side with her back against a log—they talked and talked until sleep came; there was nothing to fear in the woods save a bear or wild boar, but these would always run from a fire, and besides they never troubled man unless he first troubled them. Of wolves they had no dread at that time of year. It was in winter that wolves roamed about hungry. And besides, they too feared a fire. Some animal called to his mate in the distance, a few birds sang plaintive notes, and then it was

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quiet—quiet and peaceful here in the forest where the fire leaped so merrily and words and conversation were happy. What more could one wish?

They dozed, then fell into sleep, and the fire crackled and laughed between them.

He awoke once, feeling a chill in the air, and saw that the fire had burned low. He rose and gathered more fagots and piled them upon the coals. His movements, though ever so gentle, awoke Lilia. They were awake for a time, the magic of the forest upon them. The flames from the fire lighted up the branches of near-by trees, flooding them with strange shadows and giving them strange colors. And through the network of branches above, the darkness danced down toward them, retreating as each red flicker drove it back into the higher boughs where it hung supreme. A star or two could be seen above, hanging bright and lantern-like in the summer sky.

"Stefan, I love the forest." Lilia spoke in a low voice as if unwilling to drive the charm away. "And yet there are some people who call it lonely. I have known it as a child, and I have come to love it as something human. All these great trees are living things like us; they love us and protect us, and somehow they seem to make me feel that out here in the woods is my real home."

"I feel that way too," he mused. "It is just as if there were some living part of me that belongs to the forest."

"So said the Lithuanians of old," replied Lilia. "They believed that in the forests dwelt the parents of all things living. That somewhere in the very center of this forest the animal kingdom began; and there are those of Lithuanian descent who believe that they live there to this day, on a beautiful sunny plain, surrounded by a thicket of trees and honeysuckle. And no man may stray into that sacred abode and come back alive."

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And the animals that leave that plain, though they may roam the whole breadth of the earth, always come back there to die."

"One thing I know," said Stefan, "that I feel the mystery of all things here much more deeply than when I am in the city or the town. Here everything seems natural and alive. If I were a poet I might be able to write wondrous poetry of all this. The earth speaks to me, the birds, the trees, the marshes, and the little streams. It is as if it were true, as they believed of old, that everything in nature was a person. Truly I think that man first lived in the forest before he went to the fields and the sea coasts and the towns."

"And think," she said, "of the men that once lived here and built this path through the forest. What kind of men were they, I wonder? And what was the life they led here so long ago? Could they have been the fathers and mothers of us all? . . . Just think how utterly they are gone. Not one trace of them remains except this path and those marks upon the stones. It makes me feel how small I am myself. It is like looking at the stars and trying to believe that each one of them is a sun in motion or a world. I cannot think so greatly."

He said nothing.

"Stefan," she went on, "it comes to me sometimes that I know something of this path. And that is peculiar, too, since my father did not always live here. Since I discovered it I have often dreamed of this oak-lined way through the woods as one dreams of a picture that one has seen. It seems familiar—I cannot explain just how—but I have a feeling that it leads me to something that I have always known."

The spell which held her gripped him also. "I feel it, too," he said, "but not so keenly."

They mused for a time and fell asleep again. A few hours later Stefan woke with a start and jumped to his feet. "It

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might have been a dream, but I thought that some one touched me." He called softly, "Lilia." She was sleeping too deeply. There was a slight noise behind him as of some one creeping through the brush. He turned quickly and reached down for his musket.

The musket was gone!

His heart beat upon his ribs. The sweat broke out on his forehead. Some one had been there and had taken the musket. But who could it have been? Russians? No, they would have taken him as well as the musket. But who? He ran along the path shouting, but the only answer was an echo. And then for the first time in that vast untrodden forest he felt fear. It caught at his throat; he was alone in the midst of—he knew not what. . . . There came a calming thought that whatever had touched him and had taken away the musket had meant no harm—no harm—but yet the loss of the weapon took away his means of getting food. He tried to think, but there was nothing to base his thoughts upon. He turned quickly toward Lilia. She, poor child, must not know. She, so brave in the midst of all their dangers, must have no further burden to bear. He came back and tried to sleep again, but the thought of that touch upon his arm and the loss of the musket held his eyelids open. And thus he remained until another morning broke.

They were away again early. He had roasted the rest of the hare, and that with the remains of the bread would last them until night. After that? He did not dare to think.

He noticed as they went along that the forest grew wilder and wilder, as they went over the path that seemed to have been untrodden for hundreds of years. The trees were thicker, the vines clung to the young trees in veritable masses, and the steaming pools increased in number. "We must be getting near the center of the woods," he thought.



"We must be getting near the center of the woods," Stefan thought.

IN THE LITHUANIAN FOREST

Lilia had not yet noticed the loss of the gun. She followed him trustfully, ate the cold meat which he gave her, and cheerfully made her way after him over the fallen trees and rotten branches. Toward late afternoon the forest grew suddenly alive. Animals so unused to man that they did not fear him darted close to them in great numbers and then scurried away. "I could almost kill them with a club," he thought. "They seem so tame."

All at once he stumbled and fell, but as he rose quickly he grasped at what he had fallen over. At first he thought it was the branch of a tree, but as he glanced again he saw that it was the missing gun. Joyfully he lifted it up and looked it over. All the parts were intact.

"Now come what may!" he shouted, turning about to Lilia, who looked at him in astonishment. "I lost my gun this morning when we slept by the fire," he explained. "And here it is, lying across the path in as good condition as it was when I went to sleep."

"Lost the gun?"

"Yes. When we were sleeping some one came to the camp fire and took the musket. Some one who had apparently no intention of hurting us but stole away as quickly as possible. I can't understand it."

"Then there is some one else in the forest?"

"So it seems. I can't think who it may be. Certainly not soldiers or I would be in chains already."

"Stefan," there was certainty in her eyes, "it was the Old Man of the Woods."

"The Old Man of the Woods? Yes—perhaps—and he had probably never seen a gun and took this only out of curiosity and threw it down as soon as he found that it was of no interest to him. Well, at any rate, I have the gun, and to-night we shall

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have some supper." A few minutes later he shot another hare, and a place was selected for a camp. They feasted until the shadows came about them and the cheerful flicker of the fire sent the darkness dancing back. Then they began to talk about the possibilities of the path's coming to an end the next day, and the plans that there would be after that.

But their talk was interrupted. The forest was quite dark above them; the branches were so thick here that they could not see the stars. But all at once a glow not caused by their fire spread all over the trees about. It seemed at first as if the forest were on fire. Then the light increased and became yellow and red, and in another minute it was almost as light as day.

They leaped up. Through the trees ahead they could see the glow of the fire that caused the light. It seemed far from the point where they stood but the intensity of it lighted up the forest for miles about.

"We must push ahead and see what it is," exclaimed Stefan. "You wait here and I will creep up toward it." He started to follow again along the path, his rifle unslung and a charge in place, but Lilia ran after him quickly and caught hold of his hand.

"Stefan, I am afraid to stay," she said. "That is the Fires of Perkun."

CHAPTER XI

THE TEMPLE OF PERKUN

FROM tree to tree, in order to keep in the shadows, they approached the place of the leaping flames. At first they advanced hand in hand, cautiously, to meet the new adventure together, but as they came nearer and nearer, it was Lilia who took the lead, for the fire seemed to work a strange excitement in her blood; she danced toward it eagerly like some Lithuanian fire-priestess of old, sprang over fallen trees and branches in haste, her eyes shining, her cheeks flushed. Stefan followed, hardly less excited, though in him the excitement was less a thing of instinct than the yearning for adventure. There was some mountainous thing ahead, some huge shadow that tilted its head into the sky; the trees were thinning as at the forest's edge and suddenly a sight of magnificent splendor burst upon them. They stood still and feasted their eyes upon that which they saw.

For here in the very center of the forest rose a temple of stone, a temple in the shape of a tall, narrow pyramid, unornamented, but with stone piled upon stone in such subtlety that the shaping of the pyramid was scarcely perceptible unless one looked at the structure as a whole. It stood in the center of a bed of rock, which, extending in a circle, formed a huge open space where grew no trees nor flowers.

And from the top of the pyramid, spouting out into the sky like the fire of a volcano, leaped a high, slender tongue of flame. It was above the tops of the trees of the forest, though not far above, and therefore the peak of the temple was imperceptible

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at a great distance, but the thin streak of fire was of such intensity that it lit the heavens overhead, and whenever a cloud drifted by, the reflection was caught upon its surface and spread over the whole forest.

This was the Fires of Perkun!

There is something in fire that arouses the most elemental passions in men. The sight of it stirs the eyes and the brain and the heart, and seems to provoke a kind of madness in the soul that has no definite expression. Here was a shrine where fire had been for centuries the symbol of a living God. Here in the depths of the forest, perhaps before the days when these early people sought the fields and the shore of the sea, the fire-worshippers had held their rites and made their sacrifices. And what sacrifices did these people make? A white horse, perhaps; perhaps fruits of the harvest. Perhaps it was the high priest himself, Krive-Krivaitas, who had tended this flame and kept it burning. Two young speechless hearts gazed upon this vision in silence. Fear, wonder, awe—all ran their courses until at length the sense of common things returned and they looked at each other to speak. But the two—each reading in the face of the other, lighted by those red flames, the same emotions, the same questions—sought only companionship in the clasping of hands. What was this fire, and why was it here, and who lived at the forest's heart in order to keep the sacred flames ablaze? For it was evident to both, born and reared in Lithuania, that this was indeed a temple to the God of Fire; but had not these flames been extinguished when Jagiello became a Christian, when the priests of Christianity poured holy water upon the shrines of Perkun? For the moment, as the spell of the forest and the brilliancy of the scene was upon them, it seemed as if Perkun himself might be there tending the fires in his neglected shrine.

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"There must be some living person," exclaimed Stefan at last. "I am going to try to find out." He strode out to the surface of the rock bed that held the forest back, but with the quickness of a lightning flash retreated to the protection of the tree where Lilia stood.

"There is some one there." He could hardly contain the beating of his heart. "There, on the farther side of the shrine. One—two—three—four—they are coming directly toward the fire."

Four men had come out of the wood. Their figures were quite visible in the lighted area, and their words came distinctly across the clearing. They seemed to be victims of the same excitement that had laid hold of Stefan and Lilia.

"What can it be?" exclaimed one.

"It's the temple," answered another, "but there is some one here ahead of us. Some man must have lighted those flames."

All four darted forward toward the shrine; two had removed pistols from their belts and a third had seized a heavy stick. The fourth was apparently unarmed, though he wore a long, somber, black robe which the flames from the tower covered with fiery patterns.

But Lilia sprang forward to meet them. "Father, Father—it is I, Lilia!" she shouted.

The leader of the party stood transfixed with astonishment for a single second, but in the next had caught up the girl to his heart. The three others were crowding around, their faces a study in dumb wonder, when with a crash as he forced his way through the shrubbery Stefan leaped upon the group with a glad cry. For though Lilia's quicker eyes had distinguished her father's face first, in a second he had recognized the other three as the smith, Father Jan and the mysterious horseman—

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and it was to the arms of the smith he went as the amazed Peter sobbed with the mingled emotions of joy and surprise.

"How in the world—" screamed Father Jan, forgetting that in the fire above their heads lay perhaps a new peril, "how in the world has there been such a miracle as this? Did we not last hear of you led away in chains to a Russian prison, and now find you in the heart of the forest, which we have reached only after days of search?"

They gathered in quickly about the boy and girl. Peter at length released Stefan and held him at arm's length in order to gaze at the loved face that he had not hoped ever to see again. His breath still came quickly and his breast shook with the force of his emotion. Father Jan embraced him next, and the others followed.

"How came you here?" demanded the priest.

Stefan began his story. Related in this quiet spot, the strange temple behind them and the dancing light from its flames playing over them, the story of Stanislaus' rescue seemed a miracle, a feat beyond human accomplishment; and only when the boy had paused to answer one wondering question after another, would they let him go on with his adventures to the burning of Vitold's house and the escape over the old path through the forest.

Vitold was the first to speak when he had finished.

"So. Another blow. My house burned, my property destroyed. But," he exclaimed as the tears poured down from his eyes, "I have you safe, my child, and I have done what I set out to do."

Father Jan spoke with decision, but this time in a lower tone of voice: "This marks the end of our life here. Greater forces than we dreamed of have been working against us. We must finish what we have to do and seek our safety in emigra-

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tion. The border near Krakow is by far the safest, since the Prussian line is watched by thousands of Russian guards. Those plans will come next—but now we have another task. Perhaps you, Vitold, can read the problem of the fire that burns above our heads.”

“I know no more than you,” the charcoal burner shook his head. “We are directed to leave our package here in this temple for another messenger to find. I only hope that we are not too late.”

“By my papers he should be here by to-morrow at the very latest,” whispered the fourth man, the horseman, who had not spoken before. “If he does not come, we may believe that something has happened to him. In that case we are to leave the package in this temple to which no man save us knows the way.”

“No man save us?” asked the priest, looking upward significantly. “Then what can those flames mean?”

“We must find out,” answered the smith rushing toward the shrine.

There was a small entrance to the pyramid upon this side, leading as they found out a moment later to a flight of stone stairs built around the edge of the temple and running clear up to the top of the structure. Peter sprang through the door, followed by Vitold and Father Jan. The horseman came last, and Stefan and Lilia after hesitating a moment went in behind them. Once within it was easy to climb for the red glare of the fire above lit up the stairway.

They could not see the fire, however, since it was apparently placed somewhere off to one side of the exit of the stairway at the top; it seemed to them as they ascended that there must be a small room built at the very top of the temple, in which space the fire was burning—perhaps it housed the person who kept

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the flames alive. And they noticed, while they were climbing the stairs, that the air about them was in motion, a sweeping draught that made the loose folds of their clothing flutter, increasing in power as they ascended and the walls of the pyramid drew closer and closer together.

"I can see why the flames leap so high into the air," said Stefan to himself. "This draught catches them and drives them up. I have blown through a fire-pipe at school and sent flames a long distance."

They climbed and climbed, singly, until it seemed as if they must be on a level with the very tree-tops, but the walls of the stone structure were unbroken by windows and they could only estimate their height. The light kept increasing steadily in volume, and all at once the roar of the flames fell upon their ears. Then Peter stopped, and the rest crowded up close behind him; but the next instant he had stepped away from the stairs into the little room that was at the summit of the temple.

The others followed him quickly. Stefan, gazing about eagerly, saw that at the left of the room was a stone table built of slabs, that ran from the wall of the pyramid nearly to the center of the room where the stairway descended, and upon this table was burning the fire that lighted the skies. It was not a large fire, though it was very hot—red coals beneath, and blazing chunks of wood on top—but the flames leapt madly in the draught, which whistled here in its very intensity, up to a cone-shaped aperture in the roof, which, narrowing gradually to the size of a small pipe, threw them high in the air like flames from a volcano.

They gazed at the strange spectacle like men in a dream. "This is the hand of man and not the hand of God," exclaimed Father Jan. "I doubt not that by now this fire here is showing its reflection over our village, many miles away. I knew that

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in time we should find sufficient cause for these Fires of Perkun that we have gazed upon so often, but I little thought that we should find an explanation such as this."

"Merciful Heavens!" The shriek was Peter's. "What is that?"

So intent had they been upon the fire that they had not given more than a cursory glance over the rest of the room which at first had seemed nothing more than a place for storing wood. But in the midst of a stack of branches on one side Peter had become aware of some motion, some trembling of the leaves that caused him to cry out. On the boughs piled there, lay a man, and in the flare of the flames he bore a terrifying aspect; of huge stature, wide, clad only in skins and barks, with a face that seemed but a tangle of white hair and beard, he lay there sleeping, his great breast contracting and expanding with each breath. The boughs that he had drawn about him for covering gave him the appearance of some wild animal half hidden in his den, but there was enough of him visible to show that he was no ordinary person.

They crowded back as they saw him, but their movements brought him out of his dreams. With incredible swiftness he leaped to his feet and uttering strange cries hurled himself at them. Those at the entrance leaped back; Peter fell headlong against the wall, and Father Jan just saved himself by a lightning-like step. The man was past Vitold and the horseman and the boy and the girl in a flash, and as they all rushed to the top of the stairs they could see him leaping from step to step down the stairway that led to the bottom of the tower.

"Don't shoot him!" shouted Father Jan to Peter below him on the stairs, for Peter had raised his pistol. "He means no harm to us. He could easily have attacked us in the tower if

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he had wished. But we must secure him for our own safety. No man must know of our visit here."

Stefan was the first in pursuit, with Peter directly behind him. Lilia had flattened herself against the wall and let the men dash by. Father Jan followed the smith. They rushed down tumultuously, but it seemed at first as if the wild man was to escape them. He had gained the last step and was leaping out through the open door when all at once he seemed to lose his footing—a rough place in the stone perhaps, or a pebble in the path. At any rate, he slackened his pace as if trying to regain his balance. He was unsuccessful and swung back and forth momentarily, then with a cry plunged forward upon his face against the stone flooring outside the temple and lay there stunned.

Stefan was first upon him, then the priest and Peter. "Lay him here on the stone near the door," said the priest, "and get some water from the edge of the forest where we came in. There is a little stream there."

The boy ran to fill his hat. Father Jan stooped down and took the man's head in his arms. "There is no open wound," he said after a minute, as he felt with his fingers through the long white hair on the man's head. "I think he is only stunned and may come to at any minute. For that reason we must watch him and find out why he came here. For if others know of this place then we must be prepared to act quickly."

"Who can he be? A Lithuanian?" asked Peter.

"No," said Vitold. "He is as venerable as were the priests of old, but his face is not of their cast."

"What language did he use when he first cried out?" asked Peter.

"I was so busy with my own thoughts that I did not then pay attention to what he said. But as I think about it now, I

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believe he spoke in a tongue that I know, but I am not sure."

In the light cast by the fire in the top of the pyramid they could see Stefan hastening with water. He held his cap close to the ground, kneeling beside the unconscious man while Father Jan bathed his temples. At length the eyes opened and words came from his mouth. Father Jan listened attentively, and then answered him in a tongue unfamiliar to the men standing about. Lilia had come down from the temple meanwhile, and stood fearlessly at the man's side. It was indeed a picture: the red light dancing about them and the black forest with its somber shades on all sides. Here on this bare stretch of stone in the center of a deep wood lay this man who had been tending the sacred fire in the temple of Perkun. Old he was, and careworn his face as the light flickered upon it. About him in a ring stood a serious, reverent group; and at his head, stooping close to hear the words as they came from his mouth, was the priest in his black gown.

"He is the Old Man of the Woods!" exclaimed Lilia. But they had all guessed that long before.

How long they stood watching him as he poured forth his incoherent story into Father Jan's ears they could not tell, but it seemed many hours. And when the priest rose to his feet, he spoke to them as solemnly as he was wont to address his people from before God's holy altar.

"He is indeed the Old Man of the Woods," he said, and tears were upon his cheeks, "and what he has told me is a story that will rival man's wildest imaginings. He is no enemy; indeed, he is a brother of ours in faith and sympathy, and we must see to his comfort until he is recovered."

At the priest's direction they carried him back into the temple and made him comfortable upon green boughs on the

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floor. And while they were carrying him a flood of light from the fire above fell upon his face, and it seemed as if a transformation had come upon him. The eyes had lost their wildness, they gleamed with a human and pathetic expression; the muscles were no longer tense. The change extended even to the hair and beard of white, which now seemed like those of a patriarch and not those of a wild man of the forest.

"Who and what is he, then?" burst out the smith unable longer to restrain his wonder.

"He is a Frenchman," answered the priest quietly, satisfied that the man had fallen into a slumber.

"A Frenchman?" they gathered about him questioning.

"Yes. And this was not raving. He is suffering, I believe, not so much from the blow on the head, as from an older wound, a wound of the mind, made many years ago. Indeed, this new wound, far from being serious, has served to help him, for it has brought him back to reality in a world of men. He has been half-demented, living here alone in this forest, and it took some shock like this to restore him to sanity. . . . The ways of God are strange."

They could get no more out of him than that. "You must wait for the story," answered Father Jan. "There are other things to think of, for the messenger we expect should have been here ere now, and I begin to fear lest some harm has come to him."

They went to their prayers and sleep, Lilia and her father on the floor of the temple beside the man of the forest, the priest and the others spreading their garments upon the sward beside the rock. For it was a clear, warm, and cloudless night, one of the rare nights that come not often, even in a summer of the best of weather, when twilight seems to hang in the west until it is driven away by dawn.

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In the morning they were about early. A hare was shot by Stefan, and bread was brought from the pouches of the blacksmith. Father Jan carried some food to the old man, who still lay upon the boughs in the temple, and talked gently with him undisturbed all through the morning. And when he left him the old man threw his arms about the priest's neck and kissed him again and again.

But it was not time to divulge the secret yet, the priest told the others. "Wait until the messenger arrives."

He did not come that day, nor in the night, and as the sun was sinking toward the horizon of tree-tops on this second day of waiting, without any indication of his presence, the conviction grew stronger that something had gone amiss.

Impatience and anxiety made them restless. Stefan roamed through the near-by forest, thinking that perhaps the man might have been overcome by lack of food, or had been the victim of a wild beast and might be lying there wounded. The blacksmith paced back and forth over the flat surface of rock that held back the trees; Vitold and Lilia walked arm in arm together. But the horseman was the most impatient of all.

"We can leave the package here," he said to Father Jan. "Those were my directions from the Brotherhood. I have a feeling in my heart that, since we were late in getting here, the messenger may have come and gone. Or perhaps the sight of the flames or the old man might have driven him away never to return."

"Impossible," answered the priest. "He would have remained here until he died, had he orders to wait for us—unless indeed he found the package here, and we did not appear. It is true that we have fulfilled your own orders, and more, in waiting until to-day. But on account of the difficulties that he may have met in crossing the border, on account of the troubles

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we ourselves know to exist in traversing this immense forest, I would give the messenger another day."

Dusk was falling over the forest. They had replenished the wood in the top of the tower and kept the fire burning as the old man had kept it burning all these years. Now they built another fire on the rocks below to cook their evening meal. And as they were about to begin, there came a crashing of brush upon that side of the clearing by which the four men had approached the temple on the evening when they had reached the heart of the forest.

"He comes!" exclaimed the horseman, leaping to his feet.

"He comes!" they echoed his cry, starting up with hearts beating like mad and blood surging into their cheeks.

The last branches were parted—he was in sight of them—and now he thunders upon them.

"I have found you," he shouted, "despite this vile path! And had I not been a poet, and used to picturing the future in my imagination before I found it in reality, then would I never have been here."

"Stanislaus!" The glad word was on every lip. "Stanislaus!" And they threw themselves upon him, Stefan and Lilia reaching him first.

"What a welcome," he panted, for he had been traveling hard, and the manner in which they spoke his name roused deep emotions. But the half of the welcome was not over yet, for the smith and Father Jan and Vitold grasped his great hands and wrung them until he cried out.

"But what are you doing here?" He suddenly wheeled on Stefan. "I told you to remain in hiding at the charcoal burner's. And how did you get here? I had a long start of you." His astonishment began to drive away every other thought from his head.

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"Come to the fire and eat," said Father Jan, leading him to the place where the food was ready. "We will tell you the story then. But how do you come here? We were expecting a messenger and thought at first that you were he. Did you pass another man upon the road?"

"No. *I* am the messenger."

They stared at him as at a man from whose head the wits have suddenly departed.

"Yes, *I* am the messenger." He tore out chunks of bread with his teeth as if he were starved. "I have orders from the head of the Brotherhood to take away what you have here."

They looked at each other in amazement. "But," began the horseman, "there was to have been another man."

Stanislaus nodded.

"What has become of him?"

"I know not, though I can guess. The whole country is up in arms. There are soldiers here, there, and everywhere, by companies and regiments. Every road is watched; Vilno is like an armed camp—informers and spies are out in dozens—the Russian general staff is bringing its headquarters north and hardly a flea could get through the lines. I only came through because no man can match with me in wits." The priest smiled despite himself. "And I am to go on as soon as I have eaten with you here."

Hungry as they were, they could hardly swallow as he gave his news.

"You are to go on to-night?"

"I am."

"Then God be with you!" The priest signed him with the cross.

"Do you know where to go?" asked the horseman.

"I do. I am to give up my charge to no one. There is a

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hiding place far from here where it will rest, and no man will ever find it until there is need for it again."

His story completed, they told him theirs. He went in where the Old Man of the Woods lay sleeping and stared down upon him. "So that is it," he answered when Father Jan had whispered something in his ear. "Truly the world contains marvels."

They stood about the fire again. The horseman fumbled at the strings of the package and opened it. He did not take from the case therein what it contained, but left it open at the fireside so that all might see. They crowded about it eagerly.

There in that package which men had given their lives to guard was a circlet of pure gold, which threw back from its shining surface a reflection that turned the red flames yellow. It was not large, it could easily rest upon a man's head, and there were upon it no precious stones nor adornments which fit gold well. The circlet was the Royal Crown of Poland.

How they feasted their eyes upon it! It was a sight which they were never to see again. And in that circlet of gold rested the hopes of a nation, and the hopes of a Brotherhood that had pledged not to part with it while life was in them.

And so sacred was it, and such a symbol was it in men's minds, that no king nor tsar might hope to rule their land without it. It was the emblem of a people who had risen to greatness more than a thousand years before, whose lands at one time extended from Brandenburg to Kiev, from the Baltic to the Black Sea. But in those years of greatness and wealth and culture there had risen about them three great enemies whose lands bordered upon their own. These enemies were now triumphant, so that all that remained of the glory of Poland's greatness was this crown of pure gold. Without it, hope were gone; with it, all things were possible.



The Royal Crown of Poland.

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"Guard it with your life," commanded the horseman, drawing himself up in the fashion of a soldier who salutes his king.

"That I will," answered Stanislaus, kneeling and kissing it before he drew back the cover of the case and refastened the strings. "You can trust a poet."

He embraced them all, took a drink of water from the brook, and slung the crown in its case across his shoulders.

"Vivat Polonia!" he shouted, and disappeared in the forest.

CHAPTER XII

THE LOST LEGIONNAIRE

THE shout came echoing back from the stone pyramid like the clear call of a bugle; it spread through the ring of oaks about the center of the forest and leaped into the mass of pines that hemmed them in. It brought to the listeners a quick rush of spirits to the heart and brain, and kindled in their eyes a new fire of inspiration and devotion. But as they stood like people in a trance gazing into the depths whence Stanislaus had disappeared, there came from the temple door another sound which brought their thoughts back to earth with a rush.

It was a cry from the lips of the Old Man of the Woods. Awakened by the shout he had scrambled to his feet and come out through the entrance, and stood there an erect figure, venerable but full of spiritual force, with arms outstretched and eyes agleam. He had recovered his strength of body; two days had served to mend that slight blow upon the forehead, and though his body swayed a little, they could see that he was indeed a man again.

The spell was broken. "Sit down and eat," said Father Jan in French, leading him to the fire where the others quickly disposed themselves. "And then, if you will, we would hear the story of your adventures."

They ate silently, the old man ravenously, tearing the flesh with his great, strong teeth.

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"And now the time has come," said the priest, when they had satisfied their hunger, "to tell your tale." To the company he said in Polish: "I will let him tell the story himself and translate it as he goes along." He stirred up the fire so that the light played upon the old man's face, then sat down on the rock near the narrator and translated the tale, sentence by sentence, as it fell from his lips, stopping only now and then to brush aside the tears from his own eyes.

My name is Pierre Damar. I was born in St. Brieuc in Brittany where the blue channel looks in upon the land. When I was young days of turmoil came upon us. My father died on the barricades of the Revolution, and my mother shortly afterward—from grief, I think, for she had not been ill before. As I grew into boyhood and youth there came glorious days in France; the towns were full of soldiers, the tricolor of red, white, and blue flew from every roof and every peak, and the streets were alive with drummers calling men to service in the army of the great Napoleon. I cannot tell you what dreams we had as young men—Napoleon was our God—he was to set the whole world free, and our flag was to fly over all lands righting old wrongs and making of men a great brotherhood.

And then on one great day I joined the legions and marched away to war. We conquered the Austrians and the Prussians, and made of them allies who later fought at our side against other enemies. We were so sure that France was to rule the world. I know not how it has been since. You tell me that twenty years have passed away since our campaigns; of that I know nothing. But everything was young then, and hope and ambition stirred all our hearts, and we worshiped our leader, Napoleon, believing that God had sent him to us.

When the wars were over I went back to St. Brieuc and was

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married. We had a little house in the fields outside St. Briec, and soon there came a son and later a daughter. Oh days of gold! There was plenty to eat, plenty to wear, and we had all that men or women could want. The drums still played in the street, but these were for men to garrison the posts we had already conquered; our work was done.

But one year there came the summons of war again. It was upon the lips of all in our country that Napoleon was to conquer Russia. I knew nothing of Russia, except that it was far away, and that there was a ruler there who did not believe in our God—our Napoleon. My old sergeant came into the city one day to recruit men. I had come in to sell vegetables from my garden and he saw me and knew me. There in the midst of the crowd we fell upon each other's necks and wept. He had lost an arm in Spain but he would have given the other arm and even his life if our leader had asked it.

It stirred my blood when I saw him, and again I enlisted to follow the Emperor. . . . It was when I went home to fetch my old uniform and gun that I first felt that war was not the glory it had always seemed. For my wife, with one child in her arms and the other sleeping peacefully in its cradle, looked at me with such eyes that I trembled and wondered if I had done wrong to go with the army again. She spoke not one word of reproach because I was going away, but in her eyes there was something that spoke through her tears. She kissed me. I stumbled out into the sunlight, again wondering for the first time whether even so great a man as our Emperor had the right to cause his people such pain. . . . Oh, my wife, my wife! (he broke into a torrent of sobbing, but checked himself and continued).

It was early in the year 1812. They sent us to Prussia where there were fair hills and fields just planted, and there they began

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to train us for the coming campaign. Something that I had never felt in my other days in the army began to come upon me, a revolt in my heart that often became a pain. Why should men be brought away from their homes to bring war into another land?—I could easily understand armies for the defense of home—but I answered this questioning always with one word: Napoleon! What he commanded us to do was always right.

The spring was glorious when we crossed into Poland; I have never seen a brighter beginning of any summer. All along our way the country folk came out to meet us, and called us "deliverers," and now I came to see that all our sacrifices were for a good end, since we were to give freedom to such people as these. They gave us all that we could eat or drink; nothing was too good for us; and beneath the balmy June skies, with as yet no fighting and nothing but flowers and flags and music, it seemed as if we were bringing in a new world of peace.

Never will I forget our entry into Vilno! The legions of Poles that marched with us carried huge branches of pine trees and sang their songs of old days. Little girls dressed in white came before us and scattered flowers upon the road for us to march over. The shops were all open to us and no man took our money. We were the royal guests of a delivered land. Horses and cannon thundered on before us through the city streets, flags with the tricolor and the white eagle of Poland floated on every hand.

And then we were quartered in the city. The days were long and the twilight hung in the western skies until dawn. There was music and song on every hand, and nightly the windows of the palaces gleamed with thousands of candles hung in chandeliers and the sound of merriment and dance and revelry drifted out from the open windows.

But ere long we tired of this gay life, and the older men

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among us began to look at each other with doubtful faces. For June was slipping away from us, when we should be upon the march. I did not realize at first the importance of this until discontent began to spread on every hand, and now and then an officer was obliged to caution men against open questioning. There lay ahead of us a land of huge wildernesses and untrodden roads. It was fair enough there in the summer, as all men knew, but the distance that we must march was very great and the cold weather would be upon us before our return. The veterans of the Polish legions began to talk of presenting a petition to the Emperor, urging him to take advantage of the summer weather and the plentiful food to be had in that season—urging him to set out for Moscow when Nature would aid him; but this came to naught, because none dared approach Napoleon in way of rebuke—and so we stayed.

The Emperor lived in a palace on a Vilno avenue where there was a huge park and much opportunity for merrymaking. There nightly the entertaining and pleasure-seeking went on, while all about, the people of a hopeful nation wondered and a huge army waited upon its arms. That our guns did not rust was a marvel to us; there was plenty of merrymaking for us had we cared to take part in it, but it became so at the end that the soldiers scarce dared contemplate the work ahead with the summer slipping by. There were councils and reviews and parades, and each day we expected orders. But we did not move.

A week of July already gone—surely we would move now. Another week slipped by—and then the longed-for summons came. But we felt stale when we again went on the road, for it seemed as if we had been living for months in luxury and ease. The troops of some of the Allies had already begun to lose the first fire of enthusiasm that had come upon them when Napoleon had urged them on to the liberating of nations so long ago. But

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we soon forgot all this when we were once fairly on the road again, with all the details of our work, the long lines of baggage to guard, the building of new roads where the old ones had been washed away in the spring freshets, the constant skirmishing with small bands of the enemy's troops which had now begun to bother us on our march of invasion.

And now one day was like another: arise early, snatch something to eat, form for inspection, attend to our morning duties, and then trudge along. We had come to regard the bands that attacked us as nothing serious, though we lost a few men each day without having a chance to meet the enemy in actual battle. It seemed trifling then, but later when we thought it over, we realized that these small engagements were really part of the opposition that finally broke us down. In no place would the enemy form his lines for a general fight; he preyed upon our flanks like flies upon a horse. Each small skirmish in itself was nothing. It was the long-continued skirmishing that counted. And then as we went along in this way monotony came upon us—it was march and eat and fight with an enemy that disappeared as soon as he had given battle. Finally our foes did gather, and one great battle was fought, but though we seemed to be the winners we did not gain any great moral victory, for the next day the enemy plagued us the same as though nothing had happened.

Men were beginning to complain again, when we came in sight of Moscow, and now we believed at last that our troublesome march was over. The winter was not far off; we were in the heart of a hostile country and we needed just the rest and protection and food that a city would give. We entered Moscow in triumph, the Russians retreating ahead of us; yet, just as when we were on the march, they continued to skirmish with us daily in small fights which took our soldiers from us one by one.

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And to make matters worse, those men among us who were of dark-seeing minds predicted that a bad winter was in store for us. How they knew, I cannot say. Perhaps it was the rains that set in early; perhaps it was the number of great, black birds that hovered above us in swarms, settling only when some horse, overcome by fatigue or caught in the mire of swamps, lay down to die.

Many Russians remained in the city while we occupied it, and the Emperor had given orders that peaceful people were not to be molested. Some of them seemed even friendly and shared their food with us when we were hungry. I remember all this as through a dream, so like was one day to another. It grew colder and more desolate, and the food began to give out. Fires kept breaking out in all parts of the city, though none could tell who started them. Napoleon waited grimly through all this trouble, waited for the Russians to gather and give us a great battle. We could have overcome them had they done that. But they only remained outside the city and sent out small bands to harass us. The cold grew, the fires increased, and we had but little to eat.

I was wandering hungry in the streets one day and fainted at the door of a Russian house. A woman with a child in her arms came and fed me and helped me into a bed until I was stronger. . . . And when I came back to health I began to wonder anew if war was all that men called it—glorious, noble. Had we been defending our native land of France I might have felt as these Russians felt. We were invaders and they were protecting their own homes. I could have fought to the death for my own native land, but here I could not feel the same.

Still, my faith in the Emperor was not shaken. He had always won over weather and armies and all difficulties, and he would now. Imagine then my feelings when one day the

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order came to retreat. Retreat! Never before had such a general order come from Napoleon's lips. Imagine my distress, my sense of disaster! It was as if God had ordered the sun not to climb up in the heavens. As we marched out, the roofs of houses all about us were twisting and writhing in the flames that had helped to rout us. The whole city was ablaze. And as we made our way into the country Moscow was a seething furnace behind us.

What more can I tell of that retreat? Days of disaster and cold and hunger and death came upon us. We moved slowly, still harassed by bands of Cossack cavalry that preyed upon us. We had counted them lightly in the beginning. We realized now how small drops of falling water may in time wear away the huge surface of a boulder. Terror overtook us. The rains and the snow descended. Food gave out, and we boiled our belts in water, when we could stop to make a fire, in order to give ourselves something to close our teeth upon. A madness comes upon me when I think of that march! It was day after day of struggle and toil and hunger. But still we crawled, and still the bands of Cossacks charged in upon us in the night, harrying and torturing until we prayed for death.

But at length after ages of crawling forward, a few of us straggled into Vilno, the city that we had left in such high hopes. But where was that glory now? The news of our defeat had thrown everything into consternation. The houses were black and deserted and barricaded; the streets were empty, and the huge, black birds were fluttering about us, now unafraid of the feeble resistance which we might give them. As we came across the street in front of that pillared Cathedral we were a sight that few men would care to look upon, hungry, wounded, tottering, weak. Our shoes were worn out, our uniforms were in rags; one man had stolen a cassock from a Russian church and was

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trailing the long train behind him in the snow. Another man who had been a bugler in the army still wore his bugle strapped across his back; it was twisted and crushed and without mouth-piece, yet he was clinging to it as to the faint hope that he might reach France. Other sights of misery and starvation there were, but I dared not look upon them, nor do I dare recall them now.

Napoleon had already left us. We gave no thought to that since we believed ourselves in safety at last. He left us with promises that he would return with a larger army and win back that which he had lost. And on the night of that first day in Vilno, those of us who were veterans met upon a hill just outside the city. It so chanced that in the last stages of our march most of the horses had given out, and we had been carrying on our backs, or by two and two, the most valuable properties of the army. We had the colors and the medals of the legions, decorations of the Grand Army, jewels, gold plate, crosses to be awarded for valor. It was a bitter cold night—somewhere about December 9, if I remember correctly, though the people in the eastern lands have a different calendar from ours. A fire was lighted and soon was snapping through the piles of brush and branches that were laid upon it.

Then the oldest officer stepped forward to the pile of boxes that we had placed there and began to open them one by one. I shall never forget the sight as long as I live. For out of these boxes he took gold chains, stars, medals, and distributed them among us. There we stood with the red fire gleaming upon us, upon the chains which we hung about our necks, upon the medals which we hung for the moment upon our ragged coats—though there was not one of us that would not have traded all the gold of the world for one bowl of hot soup. Our spokesman told us that this was our last duty in the army of Napoleon, that from

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now on we were to seek our own safety as best we could, but we were to bring these precious articles of gold to Napoleon in France and there to be discharged. They entrusted to my care a huge cross of the Legion of Honor. (He held it up and let the firelight play upon its exquisite workmanship. It must have been a decoration made for some king.) I have carried it ever since.

But all at once the air was full of wild shouts and the firing of guns. That nameless terror which had clawed at every heart since the day when we left Moscow now came upon us again with threefold strength. One of the bands of Cossacks that had followed us closely for days now burst upon us. We were taken by surprise, we had no chance to form lines. There was nothing to do but scatter and run.

I ran shrieking from the fire regardless of the direction in which my feet carried me. I had lived in a dream for so long that my senses were benumbed; but I remember crossing a frozen stream and gaining a little strip of woods. All night I tore my way through underbrush and low-hanging branches.

My mind begins to lose track of the story. I had eaten little for days, and the terror of this last flight drove all reason from me. I have lived in a cloud ever since, though now and then there have come moments when the cloud seemed to lift and I felt myself as something of the man that I am.

There was a house at one edge of the woods. They gave me food and clothing there, and then turned me out, saying that the Russians were coming. I ran on and on, leaping across fences and crossing roads covered with snow, until at last the big forest loomed ahead of me. Why I did not die of cold and fright I know not, except perhaps that I wore the cross of the Legion of Honor over my heart and it seemed to warm me. "I must get this to Napoleon," I kept thinking, and as I thought

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it, new blood came to my heart and energy to my body. I ran on and on, ever farther into the deep forest.

I traveled, I think, for days—perhaps it was only hours. Sometimes the ground was soft beneath me, sometimes I crossed bogs frozen over upon the surface, beneath which my feet would catch if I lingered and broke through the ice. But I have no memory of pain; I had no feeling save terror and the desire to escape from the sight of man. This feeling has been with me ever since.

Then there came upon my thoughts a darkness, and in that gloom there are only moments that I can remember. I recall coming here to the center of the forest and finding this building of stone. At first I was afraid to enter it but remained among the trees, fearing lest some one should come out. Then as this expectation was upon me I saw something large and black lying in the doorway here, covered over partly with branches and brush. My pistol was with me then and I fired at it. The bullet took effect, for it leaped up and dashed toward me only to fall dead at my feet. But the instinct of preservation was with me; it was a sleeping bear that I had shot, and so hungry was I that I did not wait to cook his flesh but tore large chunks from him with my knife and devoured them raw. Then covering myself over with the branches that had sheltered him, which were still warm from his body, I fell into a long sleep in this space at the foot of the stairs.

It was light when I awoke. I was cold, almost to the point of perishing. With my strength renewed by my feast I cut the hide from the bear and wrapped it about me. I remember now how the thick fur warmed my body. I climbed the steps to the top of the building and found a sheltered place there that seemed fit to live in. I brought the branches up from below and piled them upon the table that is there. I then set fire to them by

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exploding powder from my pistol into them. Later I cut away more meat from the bear and cooked it.

These recollections are more vivid than others, though there come to me little pictures through the darkness that enveloped my mind. I felt that all men were my enemies, that I must keep away from all people if I wished to live. That in me which had been the sense of myself was gone. I had become an animal, possessed of the wits of an animal and some of the genius of a man.

I kept the fire burning after that. It seemed to me in my madness that there were other people than myself in that tower, yet I had not the fear of them that I had of man. They were not real, and yet they had thoughts and could speak. I felt constrained by them to feed the fire constantly, to keep it burning; they seemed to make me feel that if I once let it go out I would perish; sometimes when this madness was greatest upon me I heaped great piles of boughs upon the flames and made my living space so hot that I had to descend to the air. And yet it was my salvation, for after a while my powder gave out and I could not have lighted another fire; this one warmed me in the winter, it served to cook my food. As I think of it now, the forces that urged me to feed the fire continually seem quite real, as if some strange spirits were haunting this place and depending upon the fire for warmth. But perhaps it was only my own sense of self-preservation that guided me.

Other pictures there are, though I have long since lost count of days and nights. Once I remember wandering through the forest over a path that somehow I knew well, and avoiding the bogs on either side and at the end by climbing in the trees and leaping from branch to branch. One night I stopped near the door of a blacksmith shop, and the sound of the hammer upon the anvil roused familiar thoughts in my head. But this tie with

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my own life soon passed; I became again the demented creature of the woods. . . . There comes another picture, and recently too, I think; I passed a man who was sleeping in the forest near a fire. Something that caught my eye lay near him. I approached and saw that it was a rifle—that sight brought a momentary recollection of my life in the army. I took it and ran with it as far as I could go. But after a time it ceased to be familiar. I threw it away.

His voice thickened. The head fell forward. The eyes, which had been like glowing coals as these recollections came to him, suddenly dimmed with tears.

“Courage.” Father Jan had his arm about his shoulders. “Courage! You shall come with me to the village and there we will transform you.” He urged the man to his feet and walked back with him to the space at the foot of the stairs. “Now sleep, and later we will make our plans. Think no more of this for the present.”

The Frenchman sank upon the bed of boughs, his shoulders heaving with emotion. “Twenty years. Twenty years. My wife and my children—” But the words seemed somehow to bring a strange comfort, and in a few minutes he was asleep.

Returning to the fire the priest said briskly in the manner of a man who is conquering great grief, “And now for us. Our duty here is finished and we are surrounded by a powerful enemy. We must escape as best we can. I for my part shall return to the village, and after attending to this man will gather up what possessions I can carry and join you here. You will wait until I return and then we will set out together.”

“Where?” asked Vitold.

“To France, and perhaps to this man’s home. For there

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are now many Polish refugees in France, all of them waiting for the day when they may return."

"I will go to the village with you," said the blacksmith, "for I must bring my wife. I must get the little wealth as well, that I have saved in all these years. Would to God that it were more! But it will see us to safety at any rate, and then as men we can start the world again."

"My wealth has gone with my house," said Vito d sadly, "but I have in my belt enough gold for the journey. I know that our brothers in exile will help us."

They exchanged some necessary words, though the sorrow hanging over them after the legionnaire's story filled them with almost speechless grief. Then toward morning they embraced and parted, Father Jan awakening the old man and guiding him to the path. The blacksmith followed.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DEFENSE OF THE SMITHY

IT was well past midnight on the following day that three men entered the little glade of trees beyond the blacksmith shop and proceeded by the tunnel to the shop. Peter was the first inside. He held open the door for the other two after ascertaining that there was no one about. They entered cautiously, fearing lest someone should be listening, and then Father Jan said:

"Remain here and do what you have to do. I will go out the back door and steal to my own house for my belongings, and then stop at the next house for your wife. We will come back as soon as she is ready."

"But first," begged the smith, who had now lighted one of the smithy lamps, "translate, if you will, what I have to say to the old man. I want him to throw off those skins, and get into my old clothes that are hanging there on the wall. I shall go in the meantime to get my money belt and will light the lamp in the house. Tell him to come through the smithy door and join me in the house, after he gets into his clothes, and there he can cut his hair and beard in front of a mirror."

The priest told him, repeating the directions until the man nodded his head in understanding.

This done, Father Jan departed, while Peter went into the house, and after drawing the shades close, lighted a small lamp with steel and tinder. From beneath the bed he removed a square piece of board from the flooring and took from the space

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there an iron box. Into it he fitted a key that he wore on a small chain, and took out, on opening it, a belt heavily laden with gold. It took but a moment to adjust it about his waist. When he had finished he whistled to Pierre, who had already donned his new clothes, gave him a pair of scissors and led him to a glass. He had not counted on the shock which the man might feel on gazing at himself, but he cursed himself for his own lack of forethought and feeling, when Pierre suddenly put down the shears and covered his face with his hands.

He moaned something in French. "Can it be I? Can it be I?" Peter did not understand the words, but the man's meaning was obvious.

"Come," he said, as if the other understood him. "Hurry!" He pressed the man's arm and raised his head. Then taking the shears he exclaimed, "I'll help you," and began to snip off the long locks of hair in back. He talked continuously, as a hair trimmer will—"Off with this lock, off with that one. Round about here—smooth so—turn your head—snip—snip—snip," and while the old man did not understand the words, their meaning seemed plain. It is always so in the speaking of a language; one must be in full sympathy with the person one addresses in order to make the words plain—and sometimes indeed one can tell what a man is saying through the very circumstances which surround the saying of it. "You'll have a trim in *szlachta* (gentry) fashion," continued the smith, "and you'll pass for a duke at the very least." The white hair lay in a heap on the floor.

"Now for the beard." The smith swung him around and trimmed it. He stopped for a moment to survey the work, and proudly too, for when a blacksmith becomes a successful hair-cutter he feels the success much more keenly than he does any triumph in his own trade.

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His heart almost stopped for very astonishment. The man in front of him, in his own cast-off clothes, and with clipped hair and beard, seemed at first sight forty years younger than he had when he entered the smithy. "Have I clipped so many years from him?" thought the smith. There was a look of youth even in his eyes, an upright cast to his figure that betokened the soldier, and that after twenty years. The clothes, too, made all the difference in the world.

"You look like a man again!" He slapped Pierre on the back, and while Pierre did not catch the exact meaning he got the substance of it, for he looked into the glass bravely and smiled. There was no such apparition there as he had seen before. Peter wondered what he thought at that instant; was it of himself, of the last time he looked into a mirror, of his home, his children, of Napoleon? Of what? But he did not let his wonderment interfere with action. There was too much to do. He pulled out from somewhere a hat and a cloak for Pierre, fitted a belt with powder and bullets for both himself and the other, dragged out pouches to carry on the journey, a can for water all that he might need.

While he was at work Father Jan returned. Behind him came the blacksmith's wife, and when the greetings of affection had ended and Pierre was introduced, she joined her husband in preparations for the journey. In a short time they were ready and back in the shop again, with the door barred behind them. The night was now nearly gone. Peter threw open the door in the smithy floor and signaled to them to descend. But as he did so there came a pounding as if of thunder at the smithy door, and a loud voice cried out: "Open! Open in the Tsar's name!"

For an instant they stood there like statues. "Some one has found us out," whispered Peter. "We must not let them in now."

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"In such case, then, we must stand siege. They will surely bring force to bear."

"We must hold them off. The smithy walls are like forts. They will stand many hours of rifle fire."

"Why not escape to the woods at once?"

"That will not do. When they find the shop deserted they will begin a search everywhere about. If we had but an hour's start they could never find us."

"What is it? What is it?" whispered the Frenchman.

"The Russians are here. We are in a trap. We must hold this place and until they relax their vigilance we cannot escape."

Pierre had an inspiration. It came out gloriously in bursting French phrases.

"You must go," he said, pointing to the open trap-door, "you, and the smith and the lady. I will stay—I will fight the Russians alone—and then when they are busy I will slip away and join you."

The plausibility of such a plan struck Father Jan instantly. It could be managed, only he and the blacksmith each preferred to be the defender. But Pierre insisted—his eyes blazed with love and gratitude for his "saviors"; the priest took the blacksmith into brief consultation and a compromise was made. In the beginning the blacksmith's wife should be sent away while the men kept the searchers busy, then one or both of the men could join her while some display of defense was kept up. Then at some favorable opportunity the rest of the party could join them.

The pounding at the door, which had come to an end after the first summons, now began again with increased volume and there was the sound of many voices outside. "Open, open!" they shouted, beating at the door with the butts of guns. "Open or it will be the worse for you!" As a matter of fact the house

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had been closely guarded ever since the night of the first search, and it was only that Father Jan and the blacksmith took such precautions that their presence had not been noted earlier. As it was, their foresight had given them time in which to get ready.

The three men followed the blacksmith's wife into the tunnel, but left her when they reached the supply of firearms and powder stored at some distance from the trap-door. She went on to wait for them according to directions, while they heaped their arms with muskets and ramrods, and then rolled up keg after keg of powder into the smithy, knocking off the heads of the kegs and standing them in a protected place. Then under the smith's orders they loaded all the muskets—about a dozen—and laid them on the floor. He quickly took a supply of pegs from a large bin and fitted them into holes in the floor on two sides of the room, and along the table at the west wall, to hold the stocks of the guns in place. This done, with a hammer and an iron bar he knocked loose little round plugs in the walls of the smithy, and pushed the muzzles of the guns into the holes where the plugs had been.

Father Jan watched him in amazement. "You were prepared for this," he exclaimed. "I never saw such a harmless place become a fortress so quickly."

"I was prepared," answered the smith. "During the revolution, at one time I had enough powder and bullets and arms to supply a small army. Much of that was used. I knew too that some time my storehouse might be discovered, and I was ready to put up a good defense. These guns are held in place firmly. All that one has to do is to load them and go from one gun to another, firing. Any who are besieging the smithy will think that a dozen men are firing at them. With another man to help—one to follow me loading each gun after I fire it—I could hold off an army with muskets for several hours."

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Suddenly the morning reverberated to the beating of a drum. The three men stared at each other in the gloomy smithy where only the lamp was burning.

"There must be a large detachment of men," exclaimed Peter. "They must still believe that we are sheltering the horseman here."

He spoke the truth. Two companies of infantry had been stationed in the village, for the commander had definitely traced the rider to this point. A close watch had been kept and no chances were to be taken. This seemed to be the last hope of the officers for recovering the desired parcel.

"Look at Pierre," whispered Peter.

They glanced at him. At the sound of the drum a transformation even greater than that caused by the cutting of his hair had come over him. His face had become alert, his nostrils dilated, his breathing came fast. His shoulders straightened—he was on fire.

"*Allons!*" he cried.

"A soldier of Napoleon!" exclaimed Father Jan.

They were thundering at the door. "Fire," came a command in Russian from outside. The bullets spattered over the strong bulwarks of the smithy and crashed through the windows of the house adjoining it. "They can do no harm that way," said Peter.

Pierre rushed to the gun nearest to the place from which the volley had come. *Crack*—he had pulled the trigger, and there came a loud cry from outside. "Give them the whole," shouted the smith and he rushed from one gun to another, firing each one quickly, the priest and Pierre following, Pierre loading, and now and then touching a trigger.

"You go now and join my wife," said Peter to Father Jan when the first round was finished. "I will follow you in a moment, and then Pierre will come." The priest hesitated, for

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he hated to leave the scene of action, but it was part of the plan for him to go first, and he went, disappearing in the tunnel and leaving the two men alone.

Outside the smithy all was action. At the first volley from the shop the officer had called back his men, believing that he had to do with a force of at least twelve men. Then arranging them behind fences and trees he threw a complete line about the house and ordered the under-officers to keep the bullets playing upon it. In a few moments the upper part of the house itself was reduced to splinters, but the smithy roof held firm. Bullets fired at the low bulwarks only spent themselves in the thick timbers built there as reinforcement by the smith, and no white flag was showing as the officer had expected.

In front of the smithy an eager officer exceeded his orders. Gathering a squad of men he rushed valiantly upon the heavy door. *Crash!* The guns roared from the smithy, and down went two men in the party. "Back! Back!" cried the officer. "They will fire again." And throwing themselves on the ground his men escaped the next volley. It was so light now that within the smithy they could see to fire without using the lamp, but Peter did not extinguish it.

"It has one more use, yet." And twisting up a fuse of rope he soaked it with oil and dipped it in the powder until it was black. Then drawing the powder kegs close together, and getting half a dozen more from the passageway to pile upon the dozen on the floor he motioned to Pierre. In dumb show, frantically, he acted before the Frenchman the part that he should play with the lamp. Like a good soldier Pierre understood these tactics at once, even though he could not understand a word of Peter's Polish.

"*Oui, oui,*" he vociferated, his eyes shining with pleasure. "*Oui, oui!*"

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From a port-hole Peter could see that at least two hundred men were in action outside. Cavalrymen who had ridden up had all dismounted from their horses and were preparing to fight on foot. The hail of bullets that was poured in upon the smithy by all these men was only just beginning to take effect in the splintering and cracking of boards, but the building would easily hold out for some time yet. Could Pierre but keep them occupied for a while, they could put enough distance between themselves and the soldiers to be safely in the woods leading to the forest. None would think of searching so far. But could Pierre escape? Or could he even now persuade him to go first? Catching at his arm, he made signs for him to join the others through the passageway. But Pierre only thrust him to one side impatiently as he loaded another gun. Peter shook his head. Well, at least he had a chance of escape—a good chance if only he would follow directions.

A grizzled Russian sergeant who had been through many campaigns dashed another company at the door. Pierre met them with a volley, and shouted through an aperture, "*Vive l'Empereur!*" The sergeant fell back in astonishment. "In the days of my youth I heard that call," he cried. "That was the battle cry of Napoleon's army. Have ghosts come to life to war against us?" But the others did not know what he meant and fought on.

Pierre's shots were taking effect too. Here and there across the meadow in front of the shop, wounded men were being dragged to carts on the main road. On the farther side the muskets were pointed a little too low to do any real execution, but the bullets dug up the ground in front of the fence where the soldiers were lying and covered them with little spurts of earth. It kept them in place and hurt their aim.

"Good-by," said Peter suddenly, taking up his gun and pack

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and crossing over to where Pierre was gleefully watching the effects of a shot. "Good-by."

"*Adieu.*" The man threw his arms about his neck. "*A bientôt, à bientôt!*"

Peter leaped to the stairs and was on the track of the others. He found them waiting at the tunnel's end out beyond the line of troops, and safely screened by the trees. "We must go." They crept for a distance on all fours, slowly, painfully, until the woods grew thicker and there was little danger of pursuit. Then as they turned to look one instant in the direction of the smithy the blacksmith's wife cried, "God save you, Pierre!" and the priest and the blacksmith answered with an "Amen." At length the sounds of the battle died away and they walked forward quickly, increasing with each moment the distance between them and the Russian soldiers.

But Pierre alone in his "bastion" gloried in the work of the day. It brought back to him all the adventure of his youth, the youth that he had spent on battlefield and in camp; and the glory of a good fight drove away with each second the staleness of those years in the woods. He fired a complete round, then rested and loaded his guns again. He fired a volley from one side. Reloaded and fired again. On the side from which firing might least be expected—from that side the Russians found that the firing came. They were dealing with a tactician who had learned his game on the fields of the greatest battles ever fought, and, in addition, with a pupil of the greatest tactician that ever fought.

"Oh, for a piece of artillery!" he sighed. "With one shot from a cannon I could clear up that whole line in front."

The commander of the Russian troops expressed the same thought. "With one cannon ball I could shatter that shop from end to end. But it would be a laughable thing should I send to

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Vilno for cannon. With two regiments of infantry and this detachment of cavalry I should have taken this place long ago."

He became suddenly very angry. He was an able officer and his men were veterans who had been through a number of campaigns, and only recently had fought savagely through the Polish uprising. There was fuel for his anger, too, in the thought of the smithy's holding out so long. He had expected that at the first volley the defenders would rush out and throw themselves on his mercy.

"We must take the place by storm!" he exclaimed, and sent his aide to order the drummer to sound a charge. Pierre, listening intently, chuckled when he heard the beating. The sound of the drum was food and drink to him.

First of all, the firing on the rear of the smithy was intensified, and in a few minutes began to take effect. Pierre swung around to keep the muskets going on that side, working with terrible quickness and loading and firing without cessation. The smithy was full of smoke and flying splinters. The bullets were spattering on the ceiling and walls like hail, and now and then one or two pushed through an ever-widening crevice and sang by his head. He had long ago stripped himself to the waist, and minded the smoke and roar and bullets no more than he did the open air and a light rain.

But he suspected that the doubling of fire in the rear meant an attack in the front. It was one of the most elementary feints in battle, and the old soldier saw through it quickly. Therefore he carefully loaded the guns commanding the door and let them stand, while at the same time answering the fire in the rear to keep up a little deceit on his own part.

There was a thunder upon the drum.

"They are coming," he thought, and at the next instant the whole line in front of the smithy dashed forward at the door.

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He met them with a salvo from the guns on that side, and reloaded again just as they swept against the beams with irons and rocks and musket butts. For a minute or two the old door stood the assault boldly. It was made of Lithuanian oak from the very heart of the forest, and its hinges were of the heaviest iron, forged by the smith himself and weak in no part.

Two men in front of the door went down with his volley. "I can give them another," he thought. Then taking his stand in the corner at the extreme left of the front of the smithy, he brought the guns to bear at the proper angle and fired directly into the heart of the attacking party. They hesitated and fell back. Two more men went down, and, fearing lest another volley would play upon them, the others retreated a few steps backward. It gave him time to load again—this time, however, but two muskets; and then they were at it again. An officer who had been directing them from the rear now rushed ahead with the gun he had taken from a soldier.

"Down with it! Down with the door!" he shouted.

They battered and battered until the heavy oak showed signs of weakening. One hinge at the top dropped loose and a "hurrah" came from the outside as the whole door swung a little. "Now," cried the officer. "Now—" and at least twenty heavy muskets beat upon it. It swung down farther. A beam loosened at the top—it sagged—it moved as moves a great bough in a heavy wind. *Crash*—the splinters flew in a cloud. *Crash*—like a living thing it suddenly turned toward them and settled. One more tempest of blows and it was down.

"Now inside!" screamed the officer, and some men rushed forward, striving to clamber up over the huge beams and stout boards of the broken door that now formed a barricade at the threshold. But at the very summit of these boards they hesitated, for instead of the dozen men they expected to meet—



Pierre loaded and fired.

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there, crouching before them like a wild beast, naked to the waist, black with powder and streaked with blood across the face where a splinter had entered the flesh, stood the legionnaire of Napoleon! He seemed like a devil framed there in their way. They hesitated, drew back momentarily, until the officer urged them on again, coming forward with his sword drawn. "I'll spit you, you Pole!" he cried, but Pierre's last shot leaped from the gun he had wrested from its place. The officer went down in a heap.

Another man, not a soldier, a man with huge lips and turned-up nose, dashed ahead to the front of the soldiers. "Charge him," he screamed, "charge him! That was his last shot." And suiting his words to action he leaped toward Pierre himself. But the indomitable legionnaire met him with a swift blow from his musket that sent him hurtling into the midst of the oncoming soldiers. Then retreating quickly through the smoke to the open trap-door, he snatched at the lighted lamp. For one second he gazed about at the tumult as if gloating over the efficiency of his work, then broke the chimney of the little lamp, thrust the lighted wick against the oil-soaked fuse that led to the kegs of powder, and disappeared. The fuse spluttered, caught fire, blazed brightly—sang like a bird.

The attackers nearest the door, having set Pierre's victim, dazed and tottering, upon his feet, were now tugging away at some of the beams that blocked the entry. "Give a hand, here," they shouted to the men outside, and in a second the whole cordon charged the smithy, thronging in at the open door ready to seize the defenders. And again the very first man in the line was Vassily Bek, the informer.

But Pierre in leaping to the stairs had closed the door above him. No field mouse ever scurried faster along his burrow than scurried Pierre through the tunnel.

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And then—amidst the tumult raised by man upon this fair morning when the sun shone brightly over the woods and all in nature seemed at peace—in the midst of this world of battle and death and carnage—there arose from the very depths of the earth a greater tumult than ever Nature had devised. It broke with fire and smoke, with thunder and with lightning, it echoed across the distant hills and it thundered back from the forest. It swept back the regiments of men before it, it scattered the little blacksmith shop so ably defended by Pierre to the four winds of heaven, it disorganized the whole attacking force and left them helpless and without leaders until reinforcements were sent to them from Vilno. And he who had been the nearest to that terrible explosion in the shop, he who had caught the full brunt of it and faced it squarely, he who had paid for the worst form of treachery that man can inflict upon man—that man was Vassily Bek.

And now above the torn earth where once there had been a blacksmith shop floated a huge gray cloud of smoke.

But from the distant woods, where now no man was willing to pursue, there came the sound of a triumphant voice. Some said that the voice was no voice at all but a mere echo of the blast; others said it was a rebuke from God Himself for the crimes which men do. But after the explosion had worked its force, there certainly was a cry that rent the air, and the cry was:
Vive la France!

CHAPTER XIV

PIERRE COMES HOME

SOME months later on a day of golden harvest, four men, a youth, a girl in her teens, and a kindly faced woman descended from the stagecoach in the little city of St. Briec in Brittany, France. They had been objects of much curiosity on the road down from Rennes, for of that company only two people spoke the language of the land: a straight, dignified-looking Frenchman and a priest in his robes. The others were silent much of the time, but when they did speak used words and accents utterly strange to those who heard them.

"*Émigrés. Polonais,*" was whispered about them, and every face took on a sympathetic expression. For France was now full of homeless Poles. Some were in the university learning their future professions in a new but kindly tongue. Others were working in shops. Some had already settled on the land. These, it seemed, were coming to Brittany to visit the tall Frenchman who wore upon his breast the medal of the Legion of Honor—newly awarded, but anciently won.

"Welcome home!" exclaimed Pierre, for it was he. "I do not know what we may find here, but such as there is shall be yours." There was a gleam in his eyes, a suppressed excitement in his words, for now he was to learn whether or not his wife and children were alive, and if alive whether they would know him or not.

They had traveled many miles since that day in the blacksmith shop. At the edge of the woods they had found friends

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of the Brotherhood, and, hidden in peasant carts, they had been transported safely far to the south and across the border near Krakow, where the Brotherhood had its agents. In Leipzig they had been cared for sympathetically by the German people and by friends, for there were many refugees in Leipzig. But after a time they started again for France, and now were reaching the end of the journey. The horseman, he who had brought the crown to the forest, left them in Paris to join friends in the university. Except for him the company was the same as at the beginning: Vitold with his daughter Lilia, Peter the blacksmith with his wife and adopted son Stefan, Father Jan the priest, and the French soldier Pierre, who had praised his native province of Brittany so highly that the men resolved to push on there, and with their earnings to establish themselves again.

"It is the same!" cried Pierre suddenly. "There is the church, and there the blacksmith shop, there the barracks for the soldiers, and there the old houses on the *Place*. . . . But my home is farther. Come—" he urged, tugging at the priest: "I am dying with anxiety. Come."

And he ran ahead of them along the road until he came to the place where the city ends and where there is the long thoroughfare to Quintin. To right and to left of it sit little cottages in the midst of tiny homesteads where the men and women work together in the fields. As the company came along, Pierre leading, followed by Father Jan, and the others stringing out behind, these workers in the brown fields came running to their hedges to watch the curious cavalcade pass by. To them Pierre shouted words of greeting. A strange ecstasy came over him. To find the country so little changed after twenty years was the happiest omen that his simple heart could wish; his spirits soared to the skies.

At the entrance to a pretty cottage he stopped. Apprehen-

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sion held him at the gate for a moment, but he stilled his beating heart and went inside. There working in the garden was a woman of middle age. Her hair, which had turned white, in no wise detracted from the gentle beauty of her face. For a moment Pierre was speechless. Then he shouted the question:

"Is this Madame Damar?"

She bowed. "It is," she answered.

"God be praised! You have a son and daughter?"

"I have, and two as good children as ever lived. My Agnes works there in her garden, and the boy you see is just finishing his studies at the University."

"Then God be praised for all his mercies!"

She glanced at him, faltering. Something in his face caused her to tremble. "And you, Monsieur?"

"We are Polish exiles. We have no home and we seek a lodging here."

She called to the boy. "You are welcome," she exclaimed, "and what I have is at your disposal. For I have heard of those poor folk driven from their homes to wander over the earth."

"Come," called Pierre, hurrying to the house, while all followed him in wonder.

A young woman who resembled her mother came up and joined them. "Poles," said the mother, "who seek lodging with us. Bring something to eat."

The girl hurried ahead, but Pierre was at the door first. He threw it open and rushed into the room which faced the garden. There on the hearth a fire was burning, its red flames lighting up the walls. Above the hearth was the picture of a young man in uniform, the uniform of the army of Napoleon. Pierre saluted it dramatically. "I salute the uniform," he said. "And is the soldier a relative of yours?"

"He was," said the woman staring, dry-eyed, her bosom

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lifting with emotion. "It was my husband who was lost in the Russian campaign of 1812."

He scrutinized the picture closely. Then stepping to one side, stood there looking at them. The woman's hands went forward gently, trembling—suppressing something that overmastered her.

"And you never had word of him?"

"None. His name was on the list of missing men."

"Would you know him again if you were to see him alive?"

"I—do—not—know—" Again the hands went out toward him, groping, though not sure.

"Then see here." He turned to the shelf above the fireplace and fumbled at one end. Something came loose. A brick. He took this out and thrust his hand into the aperture.

"My pipe. It is dusty after all these years—but still it draws."

It broke the chain of doubt that held her. "Pierre!" she cried. "Pierre!"—with all that joy in the voice that might come to one who meets in Paradise the faces and forms of those once loved on earth. "Pierre!"—if those who doubt woman's faith in man might have heard that word and seen that face!

"We will go to the garden," said Father Jan, making no attempt to stem the flow of tears that broke forth from his eyes. And they went out and left them alone.

Here in the happy land of sunny France, surrounded by simple country folk who knew little of the world's guile, these wandering Polish exiles found a haven and a rest. Father Jan became a teacher in the College in the little city, not far distant. Peter, investing some of his gold in a blacksmith shop on the Quintin road, was to be found there any day hammering away

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at his work. He was famous in the French country and they called him "the Pole who speaks French," for he never quite conquered the accent and spoke in a quaint, odd strain. But men and women and children never ceased to haunt his little shop to listen to the tales in broken French of the days of old in Poland. And his wife was as happy as he.

Vitold went into business, and did well at it, and grew to love the people and the country of his adoption. But he always went on a Sunday out to the blacksmith's house or to Pierre's farm, where the old memories were all lived over. Lilia grew into a handsome young woman, and the banns of her marriage to young Stefan were published upon the very day of his coming home from Paris, a full-fledged doctor.

And on summer evenings they would all go up to the hill, where the old Roman road runs, and look off to the east. For in that direction lay the country that they loved better than anything else on earth. And as the sun went down and the world turned into gold with its dying rays, they would wonder in their hearts: "How long, O Lord—how long?"



Epilogue

The Song of the Poet

AND now the land lay prostrate beneath the conqueror. Where towns and prosperous farms had been, there rose only thin smoke to heaven from the ashes already turning cold. Where there had been song and dance now rose the mourning of children for their fathers, of mothers for their sons. Across the great wastes of wild Siberia went company after company of exiles to spend their lives away from their families in mines or quarries. Schools were closed, the native language was forbidden, and about the old city of Vilno the land was plowed with tears and blood.

A nation without a State! A people without a visible nation! And upon these people lay the yoke of three great empires. What but a miracle could ever bring this nation to the light again? Laws of other nations were forced upon them, a new language written in strange characters was given them for

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expression. *Thou shalt not* was forever thundered at them from authorities above, and yet, while obeying outwardly, they must see their lands, their homes, their fields, their cities, slip away to the conquerors, and receive new names and new designations. They must pray to God in a strange tongue; the prayers taught by the mothers must not be said again. The old songs can be sung no more, the old stories cannot be retold. And even more, they must think in new ways, they must remember the great law of conquest, that "God is with the strongest army."

Ashes, ashes of all that had been. Why had the nation been born at all if its people were to suffer such agony in parting with it?

But must they part with it? See—who is this that emerges from the forest of Lithuania near the town of Novogrodek, this youth with the crown upon his head? As he approaches there is the light of hope and resurrection in his eyes, and see, the crown that he wears is the counterpart of the Royal Crown of Poland. But as he comes nearer and nearer, the crown seems to take different shape. It is not the crown that it at first appeared to be. It is a poem!

And the name of that poem is *Pan Tadeusz*, and the regal youth who bears it has the name of Adam. It is the story of the folk of old days, the days of peace and quiet and simple pleasure, and in it are all the old Polish sights and songs and emotions that the conquerors thought that they had destroyed. There is the picture of the home in field and forest, the rousing horn of the hunt, the *vivat* of the banquet—there are the old squire and the judge, the faithful guardian of the house, the chamberlain and the steward and all the figures that every native dweller knew so well. There is the honest Jewish tavern keeper—artist and musician—whose playing upon the strings the

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Mazurka of Dombrovski is the high pitch of the poem—there are the romantic count and his faithful servant—the young hero and Zosia whom he loves. Therein are Polish skies and Polish fields—Lithuanian, the poet calls them, for Lithuania and Poland are one to him. “Lithuania, my country, thou art like unto health,” he sings, “he only knows thy worth who loses thee.” And into the midst of the poem there come marching the legions of Napoleon, for “God is with Napoleon, and Napoleon with us,” and on that blissful morning all are to start for Moscow to overcome the Tsar in his very castle.

They did not overcome him, alas, but the poem leaped into the air like a whirlwind of flame and scorched every Polish heart. For here were said the things that none might say. Here were made the pictures that none might paint. Here were sung the songs that none might sing. O immortal poetry! No suffering heart so low but that it may find release in thee! No truth so baffled or hidden or shut out from man's sight but that it may write its message in words of fire upon thy banners! For where a state has fallen, a poem has succeeded. The song has become greater than the state. The nation has become a poem.

And Polish prisoners in Russian dungeons took that poem to their heart and repeated its lines in their prayers. Polish exiles tossing in ships on all seas of the globe read and re-read the heroic stanzas. In the Siberian mines its words were repeated from man to man when the chains were loosened enough to permit them to speak. Polish mothers in the wilds of Africa or on the plains of South America taught the poem to their children. A lighthouse-keeper who had not seen his native land for years received a copy from a passing ship and fell under the spell so greatly that he forgot to refill the beacon lamp with oil. In secret meeting and in hushed assembly, while Cossack police were beating at the doors, men and women and children took

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their comfort from the lines of the poem and dreamed of the day when it should bring the miracle to pass.

There was no Poland, but there was a poem. And the poem proved greater than the three greatest empires of continental Europe. For it strengthened the heart of Polish exiles all over the world, it kept up the courage of all those who saw their land swept by fire and sword. It became a testament to men and women, and its words went up to God from the lips of men shot to death for no greater fault than a love for country.

States may decline and nations may perish, but the song of the poet lives forever!

NOTES

The author wishes to express his thanks to the Rev. Dr. Czeslaw Falkowski, rector of the University of Wilno (Uniwersytet Stefana Batorego), for his kindness in giving him the privileges of the university and its library. The university, which is this year (1929) celebrating the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of its founding, contains much material of interest to scholars, and is coming to look something like itself in the process of restoration made necessary by nearly a hundred years of suppression under the Russians. Directly across the street from the university library is the former palace, now used as a government residence, where Napoleon spent three weeks of the summer of 1812, and a tablet on the wall recalls that fact.

Jadwiga, Queen of Poland, was married at the age of fourteen to Jagiello, Grand Duke of Lithuania, thereby uniting the royal houses of Poland and Lithuania.

In attempting to run to ground the legend about the lost crown of Poland, the author confesses that at one time he had hopes of getting on the track of the crown itself, but the road which at first seemed a straight thoroughfare is now lost in a multiplicity of lanes. The story was first brought to the author's attention in Warsaw during the time of the Bolshevik War in 1920, and has been retold by different people since. The crown does exist somewhere—of this the author is convinced; it is none

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of the crowns now in Polish museums, however, but is kept in a very secret place known to only a few people. Perhaps the secret has already died with the last guardian of the treasure; since crowns are not held at a premium in this modern world.

The poem mentioned in the epilogue is of course *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz, the English translation of which has been made by Professor George R. Noyes of the University of California, and published by E. P. Dutton & Co., New York. The famous Danish critic Georg Brandes calls it "the only epic of the nineteenth century."

